

Dragon at Heart

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1. Prologue: The Escape

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****Prologue: The Escape****

Zuko was running, which was ironic. Many times he had despised the Avatar for the boy's lack of commitment. The foolish airbender solved all and none of his problems by jumping on the back of his bison and flying off to sunset, never looking back. Now Zuko found himself doing the exact same thing. Ironic.

Though not as ironic as finding out, after almost three years of searching, that his Father really did not love him, and capturing the Avatar wouldn't change that. On the back of his mind, Zuko had suspected as much, but he hadn't let the creeping doubt reach his consciousness before.

That, however, wasn't the reason why Zuko was running. The news about

Ozai was bad, but it wasn't the unexpected revelation that had turned Zuko's life from pretty bad to unbearable.

_My Mother doesn't care about me. _The pain and weight of the thought caused Zuko to sway uncontrollably in the air for a moment.

Zuko hadn't expected that. Not from her. He had always thought that his mother loved him unconditionally, and would always love him, no matter what. Zuko's newly gained insight hurt like physical pain. It was worse than not being loved by his Father on many levels.

At least Ozai would give, and had given, Zuko a chance to prove himself _worthy_ of being loved. Ursa had never asked Zuko to change, and she wasn't asking for that now. She just didn't want Zuko in her life, and there was nothing he could do to make it right.

What's wrong with me? Zuko thought, for surely he was to blame when even his own parents thought that he was no good.

No. No more pain. Zuko had been a poor son, nephew, firebender and prince, but he would leave all that behind now.

The air was whooshing past him at an incredible speed. Zuko was moving faster than he had ever moved before; faster than any human could.

A spirit had once told him: '_You are a dragon at heart, and when you listen to your heart, it will lead you to things you never knew you needed'_ . Now the Prince understood what she had meant.

Zuko was giving up all the things he had ever known or wanted, and it felt good. His human life, for all he cared, was over.

2. Hidden Things

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AU. Prince Zuko quits his hunt for Aang to look for his mother instead, but when reunion with Ursa doesn't go well, Zuko goes through a metamorphosis to find a new path in life. Meanwhile, Gaang are forced to realize world isn't black 'n white. Dragons, friendships, and major changes to plot.

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****2. Hidden Things****

Pathetic, was the first word that came to mind as Zuko eyed his opponent. A village of frightened women and children was certainly _not_ what he had expected to find.

_What an odd protector for a powerful supernatural entity, _Zuko thought. Though, perhaps the Spirit of the World required little help on that account.

Regardless, Zuko swore not to let his guard down. The Water Tribes were known for using sneak attacks, and the fact that he hadn't seen any warriors yet (the boy charging at him for the second time did not count) didn't mean there weren't any.

Zuko dodged the attack with practiced ease. He disarmed his face-painted attacker with his hands alone, and sent him flying to yet another pile of snow.

A great number of bloodthirsty warriors could lurk behind any one of these frozen structures.

Prince Zuko wasn't planning to take any unnecessary risks today. During the last three years, he had taken his crew to hell and back, but he hadn't lost a single man. Yet. Zuko didn't plan on starting this close to the end.

The Avatar is here. He is alive. He exists.

Things were really looking up for the banished prince, and the only thing standing between Zuko and a quick trip home was... a frightened mob of Water Tribe civilians. Hopefully.

"Where is he?" Zuko demanded. "Where is the Avatar?"

Frightened, hushed voices. Bewildered eyes. Unhelpful silence. This was going nowhere fast.

"I _know_ you are hiding him. If you tell me where, I will leave your village alone and unharmed."

And, at the end of the day, we can all go home, Zuko mentally added.

More silence followed. Zuko sighed. _Screw this_.

It was time to put their mock innocence to a test. Zuko scanned the crowd for a suitable prey. Only one pair of eyes dared look back.

Gotcha.

The girl was young, probably a few years younger than Zuko himself. She had dark skin, long black hair on a braid, and blue eyes filled with fear, accusation and hatred.

This won't be pleasant.

"You", Zuko said, and pointed at the girl. "Tell me what you know of the Avatar."

First Zuko thought that the girl was too afraid to answer, but was soon proven wrong.

"The Avatar is the protector and savior of the world, and when he returns, you and your evil nation will pay for what you have done."

What exactly did she expect to gain by saying that? Zuko pondered. The girl was simultaneously lying to his face and taking the moral high ground.

Zuko sighed. _ Typical Water Tribe_.

Zuko took a deep breath before continuing. He would propose the girl a deal. He had made different variations of the same deal before, however almost always under a disguise, and never in the presence of his crew.

Zuko hadn't told his crew about his 'gift' for the fear of his Father (or anyone else, for that matter) learning of it, but today he would take his chances. This matter was too important for playing it safe.

"Right. You should know that if you are lying, I will know. But if you tell the truth, I will let you and your village go unharmed. Are you sure you don't want to say anything else?"

"Don't you threaten my sister, you Fire Nation scum!"

Another useless attack later Zuko was pretty sure that there was no ambush waiting in the village. No one but the kid with a painted face currently sprawled on the ground.

The boy's lack of training had so far made him no threat to Zuko's plans, but he didn't lack courage, and Zuko had learned years ago what a dangerous combination that could be.

For a brief moment, Zuko felt extremely embarrassed. He had been so sure he would end up pushing attackers off with everything he had that the Prince had ordered his men to crash, quite literally, into the village.

Which had been, in retrospect, a bit of an overkill.

Zuko took a step towards the villagers. Whether to apologize for his intrusion or question them further, he wasn't quite sure. As a result, most of the village took a step back.

The girl with hair loopies stood her ground. This only strengthened Zuko's resolve to go with this particular villager. He might have been a predator, but he didn't like preying on the weak.

Zuko would get the truth out of her.

"Sure you don't want to add anything to your story?" Zuko asked.

"Everything I said is the truth", the girl replied with venom. "People of Water don't lie like your people always do."

_We will find out soon enough, _Zuko thought.

Zuko grabbed the girl by her wrist and, before she had time to struggle, placed his hand on her head, fingers on temples and forehead.

The procedure was at the same time easy and difficult. When you'd had as much practice as Zuko had, accessing memories of an unsuspecting target was relatively easy. Finding what you were looking for? Not so much. The mind was did not work with the same logic as speech and storytelling. Things could get messy.

_I wonder if even dragons found this enjoyable, _was the last thing

on Zuko's mind before their minds were connected.

_Fear, confusion. What's happening? An image rose from her mind. A Water Tribe woman telling her it was going to be alright. Mother. And a Fire Nation soldier. _

Oh no. I'm not supposed to be here.

Focus. The Avatar. Where is the Avatar? No Avatar? But he had seen it, an airbending master gracefully leaping down from the ravaged Fire Nation ship...

There. A stranger. A friend. A boy in the iceberg. But where? Gone (like mother). Banished. Alone. Not coming back. No!

Zuko broke the connection, tried to catch his breath and cursed his exceptionally poor choice of prey. _Too close. Damn._

Zuko could almost hear Grandmaster Kurita's voice instructing him: 'Although some emotional transfer is inevitable, you must always make a clear distinction between your feelings and your subject's, or you might give away as much information as you receive.'

Like in all bending, your own power is your greatest weakness if you don't know how to control it.

Zuko didn't have time to dwell on old wisdoms, though, because an odd whooshing sound was closing in on him.

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The Avatar was toying with him. Zuko had not foreseen that. Nor had he foreseen that the Avatar would be a 12-year-old child dancing around in orange pajamas, but that wasn't important. It didn't change what Zuko would have to do. He couldn't let it.

Zuko was sure the kid was either playing him for a fool, or testing him. Despite having years of experience of both, courtesy to his sister and Father, respectively, Zuko had long since run out of patience for either.

Zuko took a step back from the brawl to re-evaluate his situation.

In spite of his looks, the Avatar was far from harmless. The minute Zuko had been preoccupied with his newly gained insight, the Avatar had, quite literally, swooped in, and tackled Zuko to the ground in the process. After having high-fived what seemed to be the entire village cheering at him, the child had finally turned his attention to Zuko, demanding him to leave.

Or you will do what? Zuko had felt like asking. _Attack me? A little late for _that _warning._

Zuko had wanted to ask great many things now that the Avatar was finally here, but his earlier inquiry from Katara had already answered most of his questions, so Zuko had ended up going with a very simple reply. As far as Zuko knew, nothing said 'I don't care what you have to say' like a fireball headed your way. It was something Zuko had learned the hard way.

The Avatar blocked Zuko's attacks by swirling his airstaff around, and then created a small gust of wind in the way of a counter attack.

The Avatar was testing Zuko, and apparently finding him lacking, since the Prince was still beneath his full attention.

He is not even trying, Zuko thought, and found that, after he had thought of little else than this moment for years, the Avatar's attitude hurt more than his halfhearted attacks.

When the Avatar noticed Zuko had paused, he, too, stopped.

"I don't want to fight, but I won't let you hurt anyone", the Avatar stated.

Says the guy who blew the first punch. Apparently, having double standards wasn't exclusively a Water Tribe trade.

The truly ironic part was that if the Avatar hadn't shown up like he had, Zuko would probably have been far from the village by now. Katara's memories had suggested that Aang had been banished. In Zuko's idea of a banishment that meant Aang wasn't coming back. Ever.

Certainly not welcomed back as a hero at the first opportunity,
Zuko thought with wry envy.

Zuko had intended to let Katara and her village go unscathed, too. Although she hadn't told him about meeting an airbender, she hadn't, in so many words, known Aang was the Avatar. Therefore it would not have been necessary for Zuko to carry out his threat of retribution.

Not that he would have in any case.

Burning helpless villages was not Zuko's idea of a fun way to spend a day. The other things the Prince had found out about Katara's past hadn't affected his judgment on the matter, he tried to convince himself. Zuko would have left in a hurry because he had an Avatar to catch. Running to, not from.

"Then how about you don't fight and I don't hurt anyone", Zuko replied with sarcasm.

The Avatar seemed to be really considering it. He looked at the village and then back at Zuko.

"If I go with you, will you promise to leave the village alone?" the Avatar asked, his tone finally serious. Zuko considered it briefly, and found no obvious downsides. He nodded once.

"No Aang! You can't trust him!" Katara shouted. Standing next to her, Sokka shook his head and glared at Zuko.

The Avatar had, however, made up his mind. Aang told his friends he was going to be all right, and then Zuko's men escorted him into the ship.

In reality, Aang had no way of knowing whether he would be fine or not, and the Water Tribe siblings didn't look too convinced, either. There was nothing Zuko could do to change that. Even if he told the whole tribe that he intended to take the Avatar to his Father _alive and unharmed_, Katara would almost certainly take his words as evidence of the opposite.

_She really believes that all firebenders are evil, and evil people _always_ lie. What an amazing conviction for someone who has never had an actual conversation with anyone from Fire Nation. Or from Earth Kingdom, yet she thinks pretty highly of them, all the same._

_Her world view is primarily based on second-hand information from limited amount of extremely biased sources. So why should I care what she thinks _of me?_ She doesn't know anything, and she sure as hell doesn't know the first thing about me._

As Zuko's ship took off, thoughts of going home were threatening to steal away his attention, but he refused to let them. Instead, he forced his mind back on the Avatar.

A crew member handed Zuko the Avatar's fighting staff. As Zuko measured the object in his hands, he suddenly remembered, from Katara's memories, how the Avatar had carelessly boasted to the entire village that he could fly with it. And how he really could.

Zuko considered his options. He could burn the staff to ash. He had no intentions of letting the Avatar get away, but demolition still seemed like the _safest_ choice. Zuko still paused to consider if he might have any other use for the unique relic.

It could make an excellent present for Father, but not as good as the Avatar himself. Why risk it?

While Zuko was looking at the staff, he suddenly noticed the Avatar's expression. Waiting, almost worried. That was... unexpected.

From what Zuko knew of the boy, Aang was many things, but worried wasn't one of them. The Avatar had looked worried only once in Katara's memories of him; when finding out his entire Nation had been wiped out a hundred years ago. Even then, the mood hadn't lasted long.

_The staff is important to him. Very important. _The real question was if knowing that changed anything for Zuko.

Zuko sighed. Azula would mock him for not taking advantage of his enemy's weak spot, but Zuko decided to keep the staff for now. The Avatar had, after all, lost his entire people, and was now a prisoner of the nation responsible. Somehow, adding to that misery seemed... unnecessarily cruel.

If someone stole Uncle's knife and melted it in front of me, I would be devastated. And I would make them pay for it later.

Zuko ordered his men to take the Avatar to the ship's brig. Meanwhile, he would find a hiding spot for the stupid airstaff.

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****A/N****

I apologize for the slow start, but there is some ground work to be laid. As you noticed, the story starts from episode 1, but I Promise that it will go very differently from canon very soon. Zuko's altered past makes things snowball to a whole new direction. Said past will be explained in future chapters.

I like ATLA (why else would I be writing this), but let's face it: the plot could have gone in a more meaningful, coherent and interesting way, especially in season 1. Less filler episodes, more character development, and a more complicated world view. Things aren't black and white.

I'm not going to rewrite entire episodes with a few minor changes. If I sometimes have to rewrite scenes from the show (like in this chapter), I promise things will go differently in them, and those differences will have an impact on the future plot.

The further we go into the story, the more AU it gets. In the start things aren't very different, because the Gaang are still mostly the same people they were in the show. That will change soon, though.

Please review and let me know what you think.

3. Save the Avatar, Save the World

****3. Save the Avatar, Save the World****

"Sokka, I know you are angry at Aang for putting the village at risk, but he just sacrificed himself to save us. And he is our friend. And he is the Avatar, the world's last hope. So I can't just sit around and do nothing. I am going to go save him from Zuko, and don't you even dare try to stop me!"

Sokka felt both annoyed by and proud of his sister, all at once. He rolled his eyes. "Of course we are going to save Aang. Why do you think I'm packing the canoe with... Wait. Save him from whom?"

"Zuko. Still remember him? The evil Fire Nation soldier threatening to burn our village down?"

"Huh. I was kind of engaged in combat back there, and thus might have missed a detail or two, but I don't remember the jerk introducing himself. Though... it doesn't matter. That creep threatened my sister, and he will pay for it once we catch up", Sokka added in a lighter tone to cheer Katara up.

To Sokka's surprise, she still looked sad and almost guilty.

"'Sis', you okay? I mean, this Zuko guy didn't, like, hurt you or anything. Right?"

"What? No! Orâ€¦ I don't know. He did... something. It didn't hurt

but it felt weird. And scary. And I don't want to ever go through it again. I mean... it is bad enough the Fire Nation is out to conquer the world, but a person's past should be hers and hers alone", Katara concluded, now with characteristic resolve. "Let's just hurry, okay? I have a feeling Aang is in more trouble than he realizes."

Sokka did not like what he was hearing, but Katara refused to clarify on what exactly had happened between her and the Fire Nation soldier.

"And where do you two think you are going?" a familiar voice asked. Gran Gran had managed to sneak up on them.

Sokka and Katara got busy thinking up excuses, but Gran Gran wasn't there to tell them they couldn't go. On the contrary: she was both aware of and okay with their little plan to go chasing after the Fire Vessel. Somehow, Kanna and Katara were on the same page on just how important this whole Avatar business was.

Sokka felt relieved. He would have gone either way, but having Gran Gran's approval felt much better than sneaking out behind her back. He felt like he could take on the whole Fire Nation so long as he knew his family was backing him up.

And I guess a plan wouldn't hurt, either.

Little did he know that an answer to their transportation problems was already galloping their way.

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The Avatar was not unlike Azula in at least three different ways: he was a bending prodigy, he loved playing games (especially at somebody else's expense, it seemed) and, most importantly, he lied like he breathed.

In his anticipation and worry for what his return to the Fire Nation would mean, Prince Zuko had overlooked that crucial piece of information.

Zuko was furious. At the Avatar, for going down on his word. At his crew, for their utter incompetence. Mainly though, Zuko was angry at himself. He should have known better.

Aang had lied to the Water Tribe siblings, people he thought he could trust, about whether he knew anything about the Avatar. Clearly, the Avatar wasn't the type of person who held telling the truth in high regard.

Zuko should have been an expert in the various ways of getting deceived by now. He had fallen into this particular trap many times before. It was one of Zuko's greatest weaknesses: he thought people were better, more honorable, than they actually were. He thought that they, when given the opportunity, would not do their worst. And time and time again, Zuko was proven wrong, and had no one to blame but himself.

He would beat himself up for it later. He would beat the Avatar first.

Zuko ran through another corridor, following a path of disarray left in the Avatar's wake.

Where on earth does he think he's going?!

They were on a _ship_ in the middle of Arctic Ocean. If the Avatar was counting on finding his air staff, he would be sourly disappointed.

Zuko was about to run past his Uncle's corridor, when he heard a small whisper of something that sounded awful lot like 'I'm sorry'. His instincts told him to look into it.

No sooner had Zuko rounded the corner, when he damn near smacked head first into the Avatar himself. The Avatar looked surprised and almost apologetic in a way that reminded Zuko of a lion-dog caught doing mischief. Not sorry for the deed, but sorry for being caught.

That's it.

"So", the Avatar said while dodging a fireball, and added with a little too innocent a smile, "you wouldn't happen to know where my staff is, do you?"

"Sure", Zuko said through gritted teeth while trying to pin the boy, "I used it as firewood."

When Zuko saw the shocked look on the boy's face, he felt a small twinge of guilt for the lie. Zuko had never enjoyed lying and wasn't very good at it. However, too much was at stake here.

_I'd have to be an idiot to tell the Avatar that I hid his staff. With my luck, he would tear the whole ship apart looking for it.

—

Zuko seized the moment and lunged forward, trying to grab the boy's hand.

The Power of Dragons could be used for many things. With skin contact, Zuko might be able to confuse the Avatar long enough to pin him down. Unfortunately, the Avatar was about as easy to catch as air itself.

Zuko almost lost his balance when the entire ship suddenly shook. His first thought was that his crew had managed to hit an iceberg on an extremely inopportune moment, but the shouts from above deck suggested something else was going on.

We are under attack? By whom?

A loud roar boomed above them, and the Avatar's face spread in a wide-toothed grin. "Appa!" the boy shouted, and managed to slip past Zuko to the staircase leading to the deck.

To his dislike, Zuko realized he _did_ know what was going on. Or could at least give it a good guess. The Prince felt like such an idiot for not giving a second thought to what he should do if the Avatar's ten-ton flying pet dropped by.

By the time Zuko caught up with the Avatar, the flying bison had used airbending to sweep most of Zuko's men down for the count.

The Water Tribe siblings from the village were dismounting the bison. The Avatar was running towards them. While the Air Nomad was busy greeting his friends, Zuko sent a swift, sweeping firekick toward the Avatar's feet.

This time, the airbender wasn't fast enough to get out of the way. The hit sent Aang flying to the ship's railing... and beyond.

Zuko felt like things were moving in slow motion. One moment, the Avatar was being thrown across the deck. The next minute, his little orange form had vanished behind the ship's hull. The implications were slowly sinking in.

"_No!_" Zuko shouted in chorus with both Water Tribe kids, and got chilly stares from them as a result.

Zuko lounged towards the railing, but he wasn't as fast as Appa. The ten-ton monster swooshed past the prince with clear intentions of diving in after his owner. Zuko might have stopped to admire the animal's loyalty if it weren't for the fact that Sokka was still on top of the bison, hanging on for dear life.

Zuko had no time to think, only to react.

He took a few steps for speed and jumped towards the boy with his arms reached out. As the animal descended, Zuko got hold of Sokka's ankle and jerked with all his weight. The Water Tribe boy lost his grip on the animal's fur.

Both boys fell on the deck. Not a moment too soon; only seconds later, the bison was completely submerged.

For a short, stunned moment, both boys just looked at each other. Zuko got his head in the game first, and just in time to roll out of the way before a water assault reached him. The attack hit Sokka instead, freezing his legs in place.

Zuko turned to look at his attacker, the Water Tribe girl. Katara. The village's only waterbender.

Oddly enough that piece of information had not been of much interest to him before now.

Zuko took a firebending stance and could only hope the bison was a good swimmer.

_I need the Avatar _alive_, but it looks like I have to take Katara down first._

Zuko didn't want to underestimate his opponent but, with even his limited insight on the girl's skill level, he could not bring himself to be particularly worried, either.

Zuko began closing the gap between them, throwing a firefist on each step. Katara was forced to back away until she had her back against the wall of the observation tower.

_ 'Waterbenders need time and space for their katas'_, Uncle had told him once upon a time. Zuko intended to give her neither.

Zuko finished his assault with a low firekick that swept Katara of her feet, throwing her to the deck. She screamed and tried to cover her head with her hands, obviously expecting more to follow. Zuko hesitated.

This scene reminded him of a memory that did not belong to him. A memory he had had no right to see.

She does look a lot like her mother.

Zuko felt empty. He felt like shouting at the world just how wrong they all were. He wasn't the bad guy here. He didn't have a choice_.

"_Leave Katara alone!_" shouted a voice that was at the same time familiar and not.

Before Zuko had time to turn around, a massive gust of wind sent him flying high in the air so fast that the world around him became a blur of colors and sounds. The wind threw him around like he weighed no more than a leaf. The Prince could no longer tell which way was up or down.

Zuko didn't have time to come to grips with his new-found situation before it abruptly ended.

He hit something. Something hard, if the numbing pain all over the left side of his body was of any indication.

Zuko's head was spinning, but he was relatively sure his whole body was still spinning, as well. Sure enough, another impact followed, this time to the upper part of his torso.

When Zuko tried to gasp for air, he couldn't. Instead he got a mouthful of freezing saltwater.

The Prince closed his mouth and opened his eyes, trying to regain his sense of direction. He was horrified to see that above him lurked nothing but dark water.

How deep am I?!

Zuko tried to think quickly before he would run out of air, but he found it very difficult to think of anything but the weight of the cold, endless ocean. The teenager closed his eyes in a last attempt to keep panic at bay.

The sun. He could still feel it. Under him. It didn't make sense, but Zuko had no choice but to trust his instinct and swim towards the warmth.

Zuko reached the surface. His chest ached with every breath, but he chose to ignore that.

_Pain is your friend. It means you are still alive. _The coldness around him was a much more imminent threat.

Zuko took as deep a breath as he could to warm himself with his breath of fire. It took him a few tries to do so without coughing. After what felt like an eternity, he could hear his Uncle's voice telling him to hold on to a rope.

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Katara was holding Aang in her embrace, still amazed by what she had just witnessed. Not only had Aang, no, the Avatar, taken down all the Fire Nation soldiers, he had done so using air and waterbending.

And it had been the most amazing bending she had ever seen. Katara had grown up hearing stories of the Avatar's might, but to see it in person was a whole different story. She didn't have time to dwell on it, though, since she had to make sure Aang was okay. And then, she had a few questions for the boy.

Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you tell me?

Sokka was at Appa's reigns, guiding them away from the Fire Nation ship, which was quickly becoming just a dot in the horizon.

"I don't think they are following us", Sokka commented as he turned towards Katara and Aang. "And Aang, damn! That's what I call waterbending."

Aang laughed, Katara smiled, and just like that, everything was back to normal. Of course, Katara knew her life would never go back the way it used to be, but, somehow, she wasn't too upset. She had made her choice when they left the village, and wasn't regretting it now.

Katara had always had a feeling that she was meant for something bigger. She could not be the last bender of her Tribe for no reason.

Katara was now safe and with friends, and he would never touch her again. She wouldn't let him. She would go with Aang to the North Pole, and become the greatest waterbender of all time, and if they ever met him again, she would make him pay.

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"That's really not necessary, Uncle," Zuko said. He would have sounded more convincing if his voice hadn't broken twice during a short sentence.

He must really be in pain to let it show, Iroh thought with worry.

Sergeant Cho had patched his nephew up the best he could, but despite Zuko's expressed wishes, Iroh was determined to take him to see a real healer in the next Fire Nation outpost. Meanwhile, Uncle would do his best to protect the young prince from himself and his foolhardy quest.

"I am just making sure your recovery will be as swift as possible", Iroh said with a light tone, trying not to sound too condescending,

knowing how well his nephew would take to that.

Watching the Avatar throw Zuko into the side of an iceberg had been one of the worst moments in Iroh's life. The Arctic Ocean was dangerous to anyone, but it was also the furthest thing from a firebender's comfort zone.

For a moment, Iroh had thought Zuko wasn't coming back up again, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing another son.

Iroh thanked Agni that his nephew was made of sturdier things. However, he feared Zuko himself saw nothing to be thankful for.

Your life has meaning, nephew. I wish you could see that, even if your father does not.

4. The Assassin

4. The Assassin

Two years ago

Zuko was holding his breath. It was a bad habit and he knew it.

Uncle had lectured him a hundred times on how it was never advisable for a firebender to let himself get out of breath. Controlling one's breathing could save a firebender's life if he suddenly came under attack, and in Fire Nation culture, it was both customary and wise to always presume an attempt on one's life was underway.

Still, when someone was passing only a few meters under Zuko on a narrow corridor, he couldn't help but hold his breath. The tenseness in his mind and body was not eased by the fact that he was the intruder here.

An elderly man Zuko presumed was a monk of sorts walked the corridor at a leisurely pace. He did not look around himself. The man didn't appear to suspect anything was out of place.

Zuko watched the monk while hanging in his hiding spot near the ceiling, hoping the many shadows of the poorly lit passage rendered him invisible.

Stealth was the reason Zuko had chosen to wear a simple, dark blue battle outfit tonight. Although he didn't plan on getting in a fight, he had also brought his Dao swords along for this little ninja mission.

Zuko regretted that he hadn't brought with him anything that would completely cover his face. In the unlikely scenario that the man passing under him decided that today was a good day to admire the passage's few decorations, Zuko's pale skin might give away his position.

The outfit is good, but not complete. I'll need to work on it.

The man disappeared behind a corner and Zuko released his breath. The

Prince listened for sounds indicating more company was on the way. Nothing. It was safe for him to land.

Zuko continued to advance deeper into the monastery's depths.

Nothing so far indicated that the place had something to hide. No signs of a secret Air Nomad cell or, better yet, the Avatar himself, but Zuko had not expected finding such signs to be easy.

Zuko had already searched all the Air Temples, so he had an idea on just how unlikely it was that he would ever find an airbender, let alone the one he actually needed to find. That was already presuming that there even were any left to be found.

The Northern Air Temple had been the closest the young Prince had had to a sighting. Too bad the people on the gliders had turned out to be Earth Kingdom citizens. Despite their flashy way of moving, they weren't airbenders. Zuko had been getting his hopes up too soon.

Now the Prince was running out of obvious hiding places to check. The world was vast and the Avatar could be hiding anywhere, and 'anywhere' was a bad place to start his search from.

This monastery, on the other hand, was like designed for hiding things. It was secluded, small, located in high and harsh climate: everything an airbender would want. It was almost too good to be true, and therefore Zuko presumed it wasn't.

Most likely these people are just a bunch of old fools who have decided to retire up here to have more time to write poetry or play Pai Sho or whatever else useless they do with their time.

Still, the place was definitely suspicious enough to warrant looking into. Zuko's ship had stopped at a nearby port for supplies, and Zuko had done some asking around about this place.

The monastery was located in a small valley at the root of three mountains, and was built like a fortress. It had high walls, as was customary for Earth Kingdom settlements, and an easily defensible position; backed from three sides against steep cliffs, the only direction it could be attacked from was lower ground.

Zuko had immediately decided to check the place out, but the 'how' had been a bit problematic. Zuko didn't have the manpower to enter the monastery by force.

If Zuko asked the monks nicely for a permission to visit the monastery, he would give away his position, and all those alarmed by his presence would have plenty of time to flee. There was also the risk that Zuko would be denied access, and he hated how powerless that always made him feel.

All in all, breaking in had been the Prince's only viable option. So, with darkness as his ally, Zuko had managed to infiltrate the monastery undetected. Or so he had presumed until now.

Zuko finally realized, why he was feeling so nervous. In this old stone structure, everything emitted echoes, and they could be heard from a great distance. Now it was completely quiet.

Too quiet. What a cliché.

No sooner had Zuko thought of that when he was under attack.

An elderly man with long gray hair on a typical Earth Kingdom braid stepped out of the shadows behind Zuko, and threw a chain at his legs, attempting to trip him. Zuko managed to jump just in time to avoid getting tackled.

Immediately another man, the same dark-robed man who had passed under the Prince moments earlier, entered the fight. He threw four knives from his sleeves at Zuko.

The man was surprisingly fast and agile for his age, but Zuko had learned how to duck knives from the best.

Zuko ducked two of the knives and blocked the other two with his Dao swords.

The young prince took a few running steps along a wall to get more space between him and his attackers, and to avoid getting caught between two fires. The metaphor turned out to be quite literal, when a third man attacked Zuko using firebending.

Zuko hadn't expected this. His balance wavered for a crucial moment, and suddenly two of the men were on him and trying to hold him down.

The Prince managed to do a few sweeping firekicks and push his attackers off of him. In the same movement, he whirled onto his feet and into a battle stance, Dao blades poised; ready to both attack and deflect attacks if need be.

To his horror, Zuko noticed that even more men had arrived out of nowhere. All of them were armed and half of them in firebending stances. Seven men in total had been able to sneak up on him with Zuko being none the wiser.

Oh great. I let a bunch of 90-year-olds get the drop on me. Even if I survive this, I'll never live it down.

Zuko was surrounded, but he would be damned if he went down without a fight.

"You are outnumbered and outmatched. Resistance is pointless. Surrender and drop your weapons", one of the men said. He was probably in his forties, and even though he, too, wore his dark hair on a braid, from this distance his features were undeniable Fire Nation; he had narrow bronze eyes and pale skin.

Yeah right I will, Zuko thought, unwavering.

"Surrender, assassin, or we will take you down", the man continued, his voice even and threatening.

"I am not an assassin", Zuko answered without thinking. Well, it _was_ the truth. Zuko was only fourteen, after all, and had never killed anyone, so an assassin was just about the furthest thing from the truth.

"You take us for fools, young Prince? What other business do you suppose the Fire Lord would have here?" another man, in his fifties with throwing knives in his hand, said with open suspicion.

Zuko was taken aback.

Not only did they notice I'm here, but they had time to identify me as well. Who are these people?

Zuko was mostly confused, but the misplaced accusations also angered him. "I was not sent here by my Father! Not unless you are hiding the Avatar, and I did not come here to _assassinate_ anyone."

The man who had made the accusations opened his mouth to continue, but the younger man who had spoken first grabbed the older man's wrist. In doing so, he apparently signaled the other man to be silent.

The apparent leader of the group went on: "We will see about that. We will take you before our High Council and they will give you the judgment you deserve. So drop the - Dao."

Zuko did not feel comforted by the man's words, and he had little faith that whatever judgment they planned on giving would be _just_. He weighed his chances of escape one last time, but had to grudgingly admit that he wasn't breaking out of this one on his own.

Slowly, Zuko dropped his stance and his Dao.

The leader signaled something to his companions with a wave of his hand. One of them apprehended the swords while two of the men held Zuko's hands behind his back and bound them with a chain, as was customary when containing a firebender. Then they began to escort him down the corridor.

Zuko was only fourteen years old and very afraid, but he was determined not to give his capturers the pleasure of letting his cowardice show. He held his head high and tried to look indignant.

They went deeper and deeper into the monastery.

We have got to be inside the mountain by now, Zuko realized. The thought of being under tons of solid rock only added to his discomfort. He had grown up hearing horror stories of firebenders getting buried alive, forever disconnected from their source of power.

Finally, they entered a room. It was the biggest hall Zuko had seen here yet. The walls were round and the ceiling high. Many torches lit the walls, making the room look warm and giving it an air of grandeur.

In Zuko's mind, the chamber was far too much like the last place he had been passed judgment upon only one year earlier.

Keep your head in the game. Now is no time to be thinking of the Agni Kai.

As advertised, five hooded figures were seated in the back of the room on an elevated dais. Zuko's heart was racing so hard he was sure everyone could hear it.

Just - take - deep - breaths, the Prince told himself.

Zuko briefly wondered how his captors had managed to gather their High Council so quickly for an unscheduled meeting, though, by the dusty looks of them, maybe these men never left the room.

Before Zuko had time to fight back, the men holding his arms pushed him down on his knees. He hurriedly gathered his posture, and tried to look bigger than he was or felt like. The men who had brought Zuko here gathered around the back wall, leaving Zuko alone in the spot light.

All the eyes of the High Council were on the Prince. The members wore dark robes with golden embroidered patterns on the hood and sleeves. Their ages and expressions were impossible to determine because they were all wearing their hoods.

The fires dancing on the walls painted the Council's faces with shadows that made them look inhuman.

After what felt like an eternity, the member in the middle spoke with a deep and measured voice: "So, the Fire Lord has graced us by sending _his own son_ to assassinate us."

Zuko couldn't believe what he was hearing.

He felt like pointing out that if Father wanted to send a 14-year-old alone to take down a group of mysterious firebending masters hiding in Earth Kingdom, he would surely have waited until Azula was of age.

"I am not here on the Fire Lord's behalf, and I did not come to assassinate anyone", Zuko answered as sternly as he could.

"Clever of him to pretend to banish the boy, so we would not see the attack coming", another Council member commented, more to his companions than to Zuko.

Zuko felt his temper rise. The Council obviously knew nothing of him or his Father. "I was not sent here! I'm not an assassin!"

The Council member in the middle continued as if Zuko hadn't spoken at all: "What is the Fire Lord's plan? What does he want with the Power of Dragons?"

Zuko had no idea who these people were or what they were talking about, but he was pretty sure the Fire Lord was too important a man to be bothered with this bunch of paranoid traitors. Most likely his Father didn't even know they existed, let alone cared if they continued to do so.

Zuko was annoyed to have to repeat himself over and over again to people who had clearly already made up their minds about him, so he didn't. Instead he glared at them with all the defiance a 14-year-old could muster.

The Council members seemed to accept that they weren't going to get any answers from him.

They looked at each other, and in turn, each gave a slight nod of consent. The member in the middle spoke again: "We will see."

The hooded man stood up and walked over to Zuko. Zuko was frozen in place by panic and a flood of memories he could no longer keep at bay. The room in front of him was swaying in a dance of flames, and the faceless man advancing on him became the likeness of his Father.

The man touched the skin over Zuko's scarred left eye, and all hell broke loose. Zuko was no longer imagining being at the Agni Kai; he was at the Agni Kai!

Oh, no. Please don't. I'm so sorry. I'll never let you down again, I promise...

Suddenly, through the pain and fear, a hunch told Zuko that something was out of place. He wasn't alone.

Zuko could feel a presence. Someone uninvited was inside his mind. Someone else was with him at the Agni Kai, seeing and feeling his pain and humiliation, passing through his ravaged memories. Memories that belonged to him and no one else.

_ 'Getâ€" OUT!' _

Zuko hit the floor. He breathed heavily, and tried to grasp his surroundings. He was back at the Council Chamber with his cheek pressed against cool stone.

Zuko looked up. There he saw for the first time the face of the Council member. Face of Grandmaster Kurita.

Zuko had no idea how he knew the man's name, but he was sure he did. Kurita looked surprised. He, too, was at a loss for what to do next. The expression didn't sit well on his usually all-knowing face.

"What is it? Why did you stop?" demanded one of the other Council members behind him.

Kurita's expression changed from confused to calculating. He considered a moment, and finally responded: "I â€" didn't stop. I was almost immediately _forced_ _out_."

Utter silence followed Kurita's words. Even the crackling flames were holding their breathes.

"That â€" that is impossible! There hasn't been anyone in the Fire Lord's line with an affinity in a thousand years", someone commented with a voice of frank disbelief.

"You believe I am mistaken, Master Saintu?" Kurita replied, chilliness blatant in his words. This silenced the other man.

"What did you have time to find out?" To Zuko's surprise, that voice belonged to a woman, who was seated next to Saintu.

"He wasn't sent here by the Fire Lord", Kurita said evenly. "He has come here in search of lost knowledge and ancient secrets."

_Lost knowledge and ancient secrets? _Not the words Zuko would have chosen, but the more concerning part was that he hadn't just imagined this whole thing. Kurita had truly seen into his mind.

With plenty of effort and little grace, Zuko got back on his knees. He refused to be used and then tossed aside like a toy a child had gotten bored of.

Zuko was still here, and he still had a voice. He still mattered.

Kurita looked Zuko straight in the eye. His expression had formed into a serious, unreadable mask.

"It seems to me that instead of an intruder, we have a candidate", Kurita said to everyone in the room, though his gaze never left Zuko's. "What we must decide now is whether any of us are interested in taking on a new apprentice."

"What?" Zuko exclaimed. "I didn't come here to be taught. I came to find the Avatar."

Kurita peered at him with such intensity that Zuko felt like the man could see straight into him again. "You do not believe that learning a rare talent that will open all the secrets of the world to you will help you find what you are looking for?"

Zuko thought the proposition over.

Learn to read minds? _To find the Avatar? _It sounded insane, but...if it were true... If Zuko could really learn this talent, no one could lie to him again. Not even Azula.

They couldn't keep secrets from him. They couldn't act like he wasn't there, or refuse to help him like he had no worth. He could take what he needed, just like a true Fire Prince should.

_And did they just say I have an _affinity_ for this thing?_ _That I could be _good_ at this? _

It seemed unlikely. Zuko had never been good at anything. Sometimes, he wondered if his Father would have shown more mercy if his son had been less of a disappointment. It must have been such a shame for the most powerful man in the world to have Zuko as his son...

"Yes. I want to be taught."

The Grandmaster walked up to his colleagues and reclaimed his seat. Then he looked to his right, where the Council member furthest in line spoke: "He is still the Fire Lord's son. I won't teach him."

The member sitting on Kurita's right side, who had yet to utter a single word, only shook his head once, declining.

Kurita looked to his left. On his left side, the female member spoke:

"I don't doubt his talent but his allegiances. He is his Father's son, and he belongs to his family. No."

Most people looked down on Zuko for either being from the Fire Nation or for being banished from Fire Nation, but never before had he been rejected by his own countrymen for being the Fire Lord's son.

Why are these people so afraid of my Father?

There was one thing Zuko knew for sure: whoever these people were, they weren't loyal to the Dragon Throne. That alone should have made Zuko reconsider allying himself with them. As a loyal Fire Nation citizen, Zuko should have left right then and there, and reported to the authorities on what he had learned here.

Yet something was holding him back, and it wasn't just the fact that being able to read minds would seriously improve his nearly nonexistent chances of finding the Avatar.

When Zuko had pushed Kurita away, he had briefly seen into the old man's memories. Zuko hadn't seen much, but nothing he had seen implied that these people intended to harm the Fire Nation. They weren't mean or ruthless, just... paranoid.

Actually, despite the fact that Zuko had come here to spy on them, they did not intend to kill him. Not even if it meant that they would have to relocate their entire operations. They didn't want to destroy his life, and nor did Zuko want to destroy theirs.

Zuko realized that he _wasn't_ upset because these people weren't the most upright Fire Nation citizen's one could find. The part that truly bothered the Prince was that they still saw him as what they _thought_ him to be, instead what he _was_.

How could Zuko ever prove his worth to anyone if no one was willing to give him a chance?

After considering for a long moment, the last of the Council members spoke: "The last thing we need to do is add to the Fire Lord's power."

Of course they will reject me. I should have learned by now that I am not wanted.

"He will be my student, then", Kurita said.

More than one voice began simultaneously to argue against it, but Kurita raised his hand, and all the voices were silenced.

Kurita spoke slowly: "Anyone who wishes to better himself, and dedicate his life to our sacred art should be given a chance to do so, regardless of their parentage. This is one of the main ideals of our Order, and this situation does not call for an exception."

Kurita's next words were meant for Zuko. "Should he prove unworthy, we will know."

Zuko met the Grandmaster's gaze steadily.

I'll prove myself worthy, or die trying. I refuse to fail.

"Welcome to the Order of Shadows, apprentice Zuko."

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****A/N****

Just a brief look at Zuko's past and where he learned all those ninja moves and mindreading.

About OCs:

Since I'm writing an AU, the altered plot requires some new characters and groups to run smoothly, but I have no intentions of putting more emphasis on OCs than on characters from the show. Even though this is AU, it is about the same people we saw and liked in the show, except that Zuko is the lead character instead of Aang.

Some OCs will show up more than once and get more screen time, but they are and will always be _side characters, _and are basically there to help the story move forward.

5. Learning the Hard Way

****5. Learning the Hard Way****

Zuko was sitting alone in his cabin onboard his ship. Uncle had forced him to take the day off, but Zuko was no good at sitting around doing nothing even on the best of days. Now that he knew the Avatar was getting further away every minute they wasted on his health, Zuko was getting anxious.

Sergeant Cho had estimated that the prince had at least three broken ribs and a mild concussion, and Uncle insisted that they took it seriously and went to see a healer before going after the Avatar. Since Zuko had no idea which way the Avatar had gone, he had no choice but to comply.

The one good thing about the situation was that now Zuko had time to practice his mindreading. And practice it needed. Zuko was by no means a master when it came to using the Power of Dragons, but he couldn't afford to keep making rookie mistakes like the ones he had made back in the village when reading Katara.

The things Zuko had found out about Katara's past had made him lower his defenses for a crucial moment. Loosing sight of what thoughts were yours and what belonged to someone else could be problematic.

Back in the village, Zuko may have accidentally allowed Katara to see into his own past, and although he wasn't sure how much of himself he had revealed, Zuko had an unnerving feeling that whatever it was, it would come back to haunt him one day.

Uncle was the only person on board the ship who knew of Zuko's

unusual ability. The Order hadn't wanted Zuko to tell anyone anything about them, but the Prince wouldn't and couldn't keep many things from Uncle. If anyone knew the Prince was using the Power of Dragons, or that he even could use it, Zuko would get into even more trouble than he was already in.

On the first days of his banishment, Zuko had presumed Uncle had offered to accompany him in his banishment because Iroh (and hopefully, the Fire Nation) were still interested in Zuko's progress in his firebending practices. The real reason for Iroh's presence on Zuko's ship had become clear to him a few months into their journey.

As hard as it was for Zuko to understand why, Uncle really cared what became of him. Zuko was more grateful for that than the firebending lessons. Knowing that someone cared about him, no matter what he did or how badly he screwed up, made Zuko's life as an exile considerable more bearable.

Iroh had never been wildly enthusiastic about Zuko's plan to learn an ancient, forbidden form of firebending from a mysterious Order, but he hadn't forbidden it. Actually, there were very few things Iroh ever forbid Zuko from doing.

One of the unfortunate side effects of all the secrecy was that finding a sparring partner on board the ship wasn't going to happen.

Uncle had no affinity for the Power, and Zuko and Iroh had long ago made a silent agreement that Zuko would never use the Power of Dragons on Uncle. If Iroh wanted to tell his nephew something, he would do so. If not, Zuko didn't need to know it. The same rule applied the other way around.

Everyone is entitled to their secrets. Well, almost everyone.

On a level, Zuko knew that the way he treated Uncle shouldn't have been the exception but the rule. Intruding into someone else's memories without their permission was... wrong.

However, sometimes the end justified the means. For example, if someone Zuko cared about was in danger, and someone else knew where but wouldn't say, he wouldn't hesitate to use every means of available to him to question that person.

Still, Zuko didn't use the Power often, and when he did, he tried to turn it into a deal. It was by no means fair even then, but at least the Prince had a way to give his target the heads up that he or she was about to be interrogated.

Luckily, in most cases, verbal threats were enough to loosen people's tongues. Sometimes, though, people were willing to take their secrets with them to the grave, and Zuko couldn't have that.

On a few occasions, like with Katara, people knew more than they realized they did. Like where the Avatar was.

Due to his circumstances, Zuko had long ago memorized various ways of practicing this unusual form of bending without a subject to practice it on.

Concentration, breathing and determination were key elements in all firebending, and the Power of Dragons was no exception. Only the most focused of minds could extend their chi to other people's minds. So, Zuko started his session by going over a breathing technique that was supposed to clear one's mind and improve one's control over one's flow of chi.

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Two years ago

"You're still not doing it right. Again."

Of course Zuko wasn't doing it right. He could count all the times he had done something right in his life with his fingers and still have a few to spare.

Father had once said that Azula was born lucky, and that Zuko was lucky to have been born. It was perhaps true, but it wouldn't stop him from trying. Again and again. As many times as it took to get it right.

Shifu Kurita was eying Zuko with displeasure. Not an unusual expression on the old man's face. Zuko was relatively sure he had not once in the past two weeks seen Kurita look content.

Maybe it's not me. Maybe happy just isn't his cup of tea.

Zuko took a deep breath and attempted to focus his thoughts even more than he had done on the past twenty six times he had tried to access Master Kurita's memories.

They say the first time is always the hardest.

Zuko placed his hand on Kurita's head, exactly the way he had been shown. The placement of the contact wasn't actually crucial for the success of the procedure, but Zuko wanted to play it safe.

The elders of the Order of Shadows claimed dragons had invented the unusual form of firebending to communicate with one another on a deeper level than just roars and hisses. The legends spoke of mighty old dragons who could look into a man's heart and see their intentions without even touching them, but Zuko was pretty sure that part was just superstition.

The Order taught that, although the Power could be used either for looking into another person's memories or for showing them yours, a human firebender should use it for gaining information only, and not for sharing it.

Why so, Zuko wasn't sure, but not sharing information seemed to be the unofficial motto of the Order anyway. Sometimes, Zuko thought they were being secretive just to annoy him, but, on the other hand, they had good reason to be.

If anyone in the Fire Nation knew what the Order was up to on their remote mountain slope in the Earth Kingdom, they would be wiped out faster than the Air Nomads had been.

The Power of Dragons was a bit like healing for waterbenders: an inside the body form of bending that not every bender could learn. However, those with an affinity for the Power were few and far between, and most of them had no training for it.

While waterbenders took pride in their unusual healing arts, most firebenders didn't even know reading minds was possible. Even among those who knew, the ability aroused controversial opinions.

On one hand, any ability that proved fire was the superior element was something the Fire Nation should hold in high regard. However, a much older wisdom stated that knowledge was the ultimate form of power, and no one should have more power than the Fire Lord.

Over one thousand years ago, after Fire Lord Arizon, a distant ancestor of Zuko's, had shown no affinity for the Power of Dragons, teaching it had been declared illegal and punishable by death. Gradually, the art had all but vanished.

The Order of Shadows had been created to keep what they felt was the highest form of firebending from disappearing completely. They had a good reason to keep to themselves, and they had done exactly that for hundreds of years.

"_If you feel this exercise is beneath your royal notice, I could easily think of more challenging ones", _Kurita's voice said inside Zuko's mind, startling him out of his path of thoughts.

All Zuko could do after two weeks of training was to look into a person's past (a randomly selected memory) or accidentally show them something from his own.

It always surprised Zuko how effortlessly the older masters could use their ability. Thoughts weren't words, but more like feelings and images, but the masters could show him such precise images that it was almost like having a conversation. You simply skipped the part of forming words.

_'I am never going to get used to that', _Zuko grimaced, and tried to focus on the present.

'Your still not trying.'

"I am trying!" Zuko said out loud.

"No. You are not", Kurita said to Zuko, pulled back and broke the connection. "You are letting your emotions influence your performance. Having potential is _meaningless_ if you don't work at it, and trust me, in your case that would be a great deal of potential wasted.

"If you cannot let go of your inner turmoil for the length of a short assignment, we are going nowhere, quite literally, because I am not going to tell you where the key to that door is. You _do_ want to find what you're looking for, don't you?"

The Avatar.

Zuko bit his lip and tried one more time to find out from Kurita's mind where the Master had hid the key to the room they were both

locked in.

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The present

"Well, what do you know. If it isn't General Iroh and Prince Zuko. It is a pity you didn't inform me ahead that you were planning to visit my port. Not that I would've made any preparations; as a Commander, I have more important things to do, but it is always a pleasure to have high-ranking guests. And all the information."

Commander Zhao had barely had time to walk up to Zuko's bunk in the healing facility, and he had already managed to insult Zuko and Iroh in seven different ways.

The man certainly wastes no time, Iroh thought with contempt.

Zhao was obviously enjoying seeing his nephew in such a sorry state, and that, more than anything, made Iroh extremely unforgiving.

On the outside, though, The Dragon of the West had a wide smile plastered on his face. Uncle greeted the Commander with all due respect.

Zuko said nothing, which may have been bad manners, but under the circumstances, it was far from the worst his nephew could have done.

At least Zuko is controlling himself for now. The last thing we need to do is give Zhao more material to work with.

"I was very sorry to hear of your injury, and I hope your recovery won't keep you here too long. Say again, how exactly did you manage to get yourself so beat up?"

Good question. Iroh hadn't expected an interrogation so soon, and was now hard-pressed to think of a plausible excuse. His nephew had made it clear that under no circumstances were they to mention the word 'Avatar' to anyone.

"We were in a... battle", Iroh managed eventually.

"A battle? How interesting. Against whom?" the Commander said with narrowed eyes.

"It was a training fight", Zuko answered, his tone solemn but not entirely unconvincing.

Zhao looked at the young man, obviously trying to determine whether he was being lied to or not, but Zuko's face was a serious mask. The Commander appeared to decide to go with their story for the time being.

"Naturally", Zhao said, lifting his eyebrows casually. "Then you should be grateful that you got away with a few bruises. Taking your skill level in consideration, it could have been much worse."

Zuko's mask broke quickly. "If you think me so weak then why not see for yourself?"

"Is that a challenge?" Zhao asked with a silky voice and a venomous smile.

Iroh thought that there was no stopping things from escalating now, but, to his surprise, Zuko answered in an even tone: "No. Just wondering out loud."

"I see. Well, we better leave it at that since we would hate for your condition to become more severe", Zhao said in a tone that made it clear he wasn't going to drop the topic.

This could turn out to be a painfully long afternoon.

"Tea!" Iroh said with sudden enthusiasm. Zhao and Zuko both looked at him with shared disbelief.

"Commander Zhao, there is an old saying that goes 'even a short journey is an arduous one if you make it such'. I have always interpreted it to mean 'everything can be improved with tea'. Would you be so kind and have some calming chamomile tea brought to us, to ease my nephew's recovery?"

Well, the afternoon doesn't have to be entirely unpleasant.

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Two years ago

"Endurance. Persistence. Perseverance. These are the core ideals you need to take to heart." Shifu Mizzra looked at Zuko as she spoke. She had piercing eyes so dark they were almost black. Her hair matched her eyes and was worn on a long phoenix-tail that flowed with her every move.

She was beautiful, but underestimating her would probably be the last stupid thing Zuko would have time to do. Luckily, having been raised with Azula, Zuko had learned long ago every meaning of the phrase 'looks can be deceiving'.

Mizzra was not a firebender, though rumor around the monastery had it that she could do more damage with a broadsword than some benders with all their might.

Zuko had been surprised to find out that more than half of the members of the Order did not have any bending skills, and even out of the benders, nowhere near all could practice the Power of Dragons. Apparently preserving and appreciating the art didn't require having it.

Zuko had also been mistaken to presume that all the inhabitants of the monastery were old, gray men. There was a good portion of women and younger apprentices as well, though only few of them were as young as Zuko.

Most of the members were originally from the colonies, but some also from the Main Islands. For varying reasons, these people no longer had prospects in Fire Nation, and they had come to Earth Kingdom. Kurita claimed that some members of the order even came from long

lines of Order members dating all the way back to the time the group had been founded almost a thousand years ago.

Zuko studied mostly under his assigned master, Shifu Kurita, but was also given lessons by other masters. The Order taught and practiced a wide variety of skills. They prepapered their pupils in the arts of sneaking, hiding, infiltrating, spying and fighting. They were a spy organization in every meaning of the word.

No wonder I got busted so fast when I first entered this place. The Order is undoubtedly keeping tabs on all the nearby ports. They must have been preparing for my coming here even before I knew for sure that I would.

Zuko had been keeping up a horse stance for more than an hour now. His legs were starting to cramp, but he tried to keep the pain from showing. Shifu Mizzra had been keeping up the same stance the same time, but she wasn't even sweating. Mizzra had said that Zuko could ask for a break if he needed one, but the boy wasn't planning on loosing this test, whatever the purpose behind it was.

Yeah, let's just breathe. In " and out. In " and out.

"Always gather as much information as you can about the situation, your surroundings and your target. Prefer tactics that are unusual, so that your target will not see you coming. Use the rooftops, not the streets.

"Hide yourself with your clothing, either by matching the environment or the crowd. That means dark clothes during night, white in snow, peasant clothing to enable hiding in plain sight", Mizzra continued advising Zuko in an even tone. It seemed that she had memorized the rules of engagement by heart.

"Avoid fights if you can, especially if you are outnumbered. If you are spotted before you are ready to make your move, retreat and try again. If you are forced into a situation that you cannot get out off without fighting, you have already failed."

This advice sounded odd to Zuko.

Isn't fighting supposed to be a show of one's might, and running from a fight a show of one's weakness?

On the other hand, his Father had always complimented Azula on both, her ability to win her opponents with her superior skills, and her ability to best them with her cunning. Perhaps both were needed.

"Still, even well-made plans tend to last only until you engage the enemy, so anything can happen, and you should prepare for anything the best you can. Always have more than one weapon on you: bending, swords, throwing knives and other shuriken. Rope is good for both climbing and tying your target."

Without a warning, Mizzra broke out of her stance and grabbed a handful of shuriken, little throwing stars, from her sleeve. Zuko reacted automatically to her sudden movement, and tried to reach for the Dao on his back, only to remember that he had left them by the far wall of the room.

Okay, time to get creative.

Not wanting to be a sitting duck, Zuko began running. He dodged the first shuriken by taking a dive, and the second by doing a little somersault in the air. Zuko was closing in on Mizzra from her left side.

She can't throw them at me if she doesn't have space to throw.

The next shuriken Zuko deflected with his armored right hand. By now he had reached Mizzra, and Zuko grabbed the wrist of the hand she held the next throwing star in.

Mizzra jumped and somersaulted through the air, forcing Zuko to let go of her. Landing, she charged at Zuko, the shuriken still in hand. Zuko guided her attack to his side, and locked her other arm behind her back.

He intended to take her down with his own bodyweight, but she beat him to the punch. Mizzra kicked Zuko to the knee. Shocked by the sudden pain, Zuko's grip loosened. Mizzra whirled around and punched Zuko to his solar plexus with all her force.

Zuko fell to the ground, unable to breath.

"Not bad, Little Dragon", Mizzra said cheerfully, simultaneously fixing her hair. "We will make a ninja out of you yet."

ooo

The present

Commander Zhao was surprised. He had heard that the Prince had a temper, and had thus expected getting Zuko to slip something about where he had _really_ gotten his injuries from to be a walk in the park.

Now Zhao had spent considerably more time with Prince Zuko and General Iroh than he had ever intended to, and he still didn't have the answers he was looking for.

Even rubbing it to their faces just how spectacularly Fire Nation's world conquest was going along (no thanks to them), and watching the Prince's knuckles turn from pale to stark white, was starting to lose its entertainment value.

The most frustrating part was that, whatever had happened was most likely nothing particularly important or interesting.

Iroh, once a great General, was these days more interested in brewing tea than achieving something with his life, and Zuko was interested in little else than his quest to find the Avatar. Since the Avatar was dead, there was a good chance Zhao was wasting his time here.

Still, Zhao disliked it when people tried to keep things from him. He also couldn't quite shake off the feeling that there was more going on than met the eye.

"Commander", a soldier entered the room and bowed respectfully. Zhao nodded, signaling the man to continue.

"We've interrogated the Prince's crew as you ordered, sir. According to them, Prince Zuko received his injuries combating the Avatar, whom he had in his custody but allowed to escape."

A smile formed on the Commander's lips. As surprising as the news was, it made all the time he had wasted drinking tea more than worth his while.

Zhao turned to look at Zuko, unable to resist asking: "Say, how did you get your injuries again?"

The look on the Prince's face was so angry that for a moment Zhao thought this meeting would end in an Agni Kai, after all.

The boy seemed to have completely forgotten his injuries, and would have probably jumped out of his bed if it weren't for Iroh practically sitting on him, reminding the boy to be mindful of his health.

Zhao left the healing facility and told his men to make sure the Prince would not leave the harbor before Zhao himself was on his way.

This information wasn't just juicy; it was an unprecedented opportunity. If Zhao captured the Avatar, he would become one of the most influential men in all of Fire Nation. And the only thing standing in his way was a 16-year-old spoiled prat, who apparently had no loyalty left for his nation.

What else had Zhao expected, really? He had heard the boy took after his mother, and although he had met Lady Ursa only once, the resemblance was staggering.

No wonder the Fire Lord banished them both.

()()()

****A/N****

Plenty of ground work laid in the first chapters. In the next chapter, we are going to once and for all break free from how things went in the show. Gaang and Zuko meet, and not on Kyoshi Island.

The teachings of the Order of Shadows are loosely based on ninjutsu.

6. The Earth Kingdom Militia

****6. The Earth Kingdom Militia****

"NO!"

Zuko wasn't sure what he was doing, but he knew that it needed to be done. He moved as fast as he could and was just in time to put himself between the Earth Kingdom boy and Zhao.

In a training fight Zuko would have divided Zhao's fireblast neatly in half and directed the flames to go past him on both sides.

As it was, Zuko was surrounded by by-standers, which made merely redirecting the force of the blow a potential catastrophe for anyone unlucky enough to be standing too close. So instead Zuko used a more powerful block in order to completely dissipate the blast.

Zuko could feel the intense heat of the assault with every hair on his face and arms, but fortunately he had gotten past his fear of such situations years ago.

The last wisps of fire had barely vanished when Zhao got his head around the sudden change in the situation. Looks of disbelief and anger crossed the man's face before he settled for an irritated glare.

"Prince Zuko, what on earth do you think you are doing?!"

_A very good question, _Zuko thought and took a deep breath. His bending stance did not waver. Zuko had made his move and had no intentions of backing down.

"It's over, Zhao. The Avatar isn't here, and you have no proof that he ever was, or that these people helped him to escape, and I will not let you make the villagers pay for your failure to capture the Avatar. You should take your men, return to your ship and go."

Zhao was enraged. "You are an exile! Such a weak failure even your own father does not want you in his sight! You â€" do â€" not â€" give - orders â€" to â€" _me_"

"Then it is time you and I settled our differences once and for all", Zuko stated, feeling oddly calm considering that he had just challenged a much older and more experienced firebender to a fight 'til death.

Meanwhile, on top of a nearby building, four figures and a lemur where huddled together behind a decorative tapestry, which completely blocked them from the Fire Nation soldiers' line of sight.

"We have got to do something" Aang said, his voice worried but determined.

ooo

Three hours earlier

"Admit it", Katara said, rolling her eyes.

"Admit what?" Sokka asked without lifting his gaze from the map sprawled before him.

He and Katara were sitting in Appa's saddle. Aang was at the reigns but obviously paying attention to the conversation. They had been flying over a scenic mountain view all morning and the glamor of the grand vista had had time to get pretty old to Sokka's liking.

"You have no idea where we are on the map", Katara said and peered

over her brother's shoulder to get a better look at the scroll in question.

"That's not true", Sokka protested. "I'm pretty sure we are not here", he said and pointed at a place on the map. "Because if we were here, we could probably still see the Unagi waving at us in the horizon."

"Wouldn't that be nice. We could go ask Suki for directions. That is of course only if your ego could handle asking help from a girl", Katara rebuked.

"Hey, I've learned my lesson. Girls can fight too", Sokka said. "Though I wouldn't mind seeing Suki again. I had hardly any time to say goodbye when you guys suddenly decided that we were in a hurry to leave."

"It was due time for us to continue our journey if we ever intend to reach the North Pole", Katara replied determinedly.

What she is leaving unsaid, Sokka thought, is that it was due time we did what she wanted us to do. Namely, that was getting Aang away from his hordes of admirers, and making him take his responsibilities as the Avatar more seriously.

Sokka had to admit Katara had sort of succeeded in those goals. Sure, it had taken King Bumi and his crazy tasks to get Aang to stop fooling around wherever he went, but it had been thanks to Katara's little plan to help Haru that their little group had gotten their first real opportunity to kick some Fire Nation butts. Although Aang was a monk and a pacifist, it was his job as the Avatar to help them defeat the Fire Nation, and the sooner he got used to the idea the better.

"There is a village over there", Aang, always the first to notice these things, pointed out. "Maybe we should ask them?"

A village, huh? Sokka peered at his map one last time, looking for a village in the vicinity of the area he thought they were in, but eventually had to admit defeat. "Fine. Let's go there."

ooo

Zuko walked down a narrow street on his way back to the port where he had left his ship. It was early morning and the streets of the small town were practically empty.

Officially, this region belonged to Earth Kingdom, but luckily it was not particularly hostile toward Fire Nation, either. Small and without any army troops or other defenses, the town had no choice but to allow just about any ship to enter its bay to refill supplies there.

It was as good a place as any for doing some reconnaissance.

Earth Kingdom's leading generals had classified this area as a region 'not worth fighting for'. It may have sounded harsh, but Zuko understood that all sides had to prioritize which targets were most valuable for a nation's war efforts. This region was hard, rocky land with plenty of mountains and few inhabitants or crops to be gained.

Thus the area had little importance to its Kingdom, and they had left it for Fire Nation.

Ironically, Fire Nation had no more use for the region than Earth Kingdom did. The area could not be used as a secret back door to Omashu, as the War Council had once suggested, because not even Fire Nation could establish practical supply lines through the mountains.

So, Fire Nation had not even bothered with officially invading or occupying the area, for they too could not afford to waste troops on an insignificant target. All in all, most of the region had ended up becoming no man's land, where anyone who had the muscle to be the local authority was the local authority.

Knowing this, Zuko put on his tough face when walking through the town. When traveling in Earth Kingdom, anonymity was often a good way to avoid unnecessary fights, but in shady ports like this one, Zuko preferred to wear his Fire Nation uniform. It served to inform anyone looking for trouble on the level of trouble they would encounter should they pick a fight with him.

Zuko's ship came in view, looking pathetic as usual. The fact that this particular port had no other Fire Nation vessels to compare it to helped, but the ship still looked unmistakable old and sad.

It was by no means a ship fit for nobility, let alone the Prince of Fire Nation, but Zuko had long ago stopped expecting to be treated like one. A man without honor, prince or not, was nothing.

But that would all change when he captured the Avatar. First, he just had to find the boy.

One of the hardest things about tracking the Avatar was that Zuko had no idea what the boy's plan was. Originally, he had presumed the Air Nomad was heading north. The Avatar had, after all, promised to take Katara to the Northern Water Tribe to learn waterbending, and since they were still traveling together, Zuko had presumed that was their plan.

Now, however, the Prince had been tracking the airbender and his Water Tribe companions for weeks, and had nothing more to show for his trouble than the Avatar's airstaff and a Water Tribe necklace. Zuko was constantly one step behind them. He blamed Zhao and his endless attempts to slow him down for this. In many ports, like Kyoshi Island, Zuko had missed the Avatar by mere hours. The earthbender prison rig he had visited the other day had still been _smoking._.

However, the truly troubling part was that nothing Zuko had learned of the Avatar's movements so far suggested that the airbender was heading to the North Pole. Or any other particular direction. His seemingly random movements were next to impossible to predict.

But now, finally, Zuko had managed to get a reliable tip on the airbender's whereabouts, and if the information held true, the Avatar was not far. Which meant that the Prince was in a hurry to tell Lieutenant Jee and the rest of his crew about their new heading.

Zuko marched up the ramp to his ship. A helmsman on guard duty was sitting on a barrel nearby, so the Prince walked over to him. Not bothering with pleasantries, Zuko cut to the chase: "I wish to speak to Lieutenant Jee. Where is he?."

The helmsman startled, clearly not having heard Zuko approach. Zuko felt his temper flare.

Granted, due to years of training, Zuko's natural stride was stealthy, but a guard should have been on alert.

I'm surrounded by incompetence. What if I'd been an attacker, then what?

Zuko felt like letting the man hear it. In fact, he had felt like shouting at every member of his crew for every little thing that went wrong ever since they had callously betrayed him to Zhao a few weeks earlier. However, so far he had attempted to restrain himself as Uncle had advised him to do.

Because Iroh had a point. In his current situation, Zuko was stuck with the crew he had, whether he was pleased with them or not. Also, they had been a hard-working and loyal crew for most of the three years they had served under him.

In all honesty, his crew were the closest thing Zuko had to friends.

The only thing I'd achieve by shouting at them is that it would make me feel better.

In any case, this particular helmsman did not deserve to have all of Zuko's wrath taken out on him. Therefore, instead of yelling at the soldier, Zuko settled for eying the man with mild irritation until he recovered and realized he was being addressed by his superior.

Finally, the soldier managed a hasty bow and replied: "Prince Zuko, I... I didn't hear you coming." Obviously. "Lieutenant Jee is at the ship's bridge, sir."

Zuko nodded and dismissed the soldier. The Prince headed up the stairs towards the ship's navigation room. He could not afford to stall. The Avatar had been sighted two clicks into the mainland, heading north, and if the word of his whereabouts had spread fast and wide enough to reach Zuko so soon, odds were Zhao was onto the boy as well.

ooo

Commander Zhao had hundreds of warships under his command, and one of them had just informed him that the Avatar's bison had been sighted near Halti village.

Well, well. I knew you couldn't hide from me forever.

ooo

"Guys, you will never guess who just landed in the village!"

Judging by the blank expressions on her comrades faces, they really weren't guessing. Not even after Ilya had given them such an _obvious_ tip.

"Well, it's the Avatar!" That seemed to make the group a bit more excited, but the boys still seemed to be at a loss about what they should do with the information she had handed to them.

Figures, Ilya sighed to herself. Subtlety was hardly ever the way to go when speaking to guys.

"Perhaps someone should go and tell Shen about it? I mean, I imagine he will be pretty pissed if he hears that the Avatar has been visiting but he missed it."

Ilya and the three other young members of Earth Kingdom Militia had been assigned to keep an eye on the village closest to their local headquarters. Now something interesting had actually happened, and it was time one of them went to get their leaders.

Ilya was a bender and although she wasn't well-trained in her bending, she had a naturally sure footing even when climbing up and down steep mountainsides. She knew she could probably deliver the message the fastest. Still, she didn't volunteer to be the one to go.

Having been raised with four brothers, Ilya had learned long ago that it was easier to get along with guys if you let them think they were stronger than you. A member of the 'weaker sex' volunteering to do all the heavy lifting would on the long-run only disturb their team dynamics and effectiveness. The boys getting to help the poor little girl would be better for morals.

They all agreed that it would be for the best if Li went to tell Shen. Ilya's time to shine would have to wait. She really would have liked to meet the legendary Avatar, but now she had to stay behind to guard the post.

"Ah, don't be like that", one of the men tapped Ilya on the back. "We have a duty to our cause. Besides, who knows. Maybe something else will still happen. A Fire Nation scouting party could come snooping around."

"Or the Earth Kingdom Army", another youngster suggested, and they all laughed heartily at the joke. Earth Kingdom Army had not payed a visit to this part of the country in over thirty years.

ooo

Aang was a tad overwhelmed by the warm welcome they had received from what apperaed to be the entire village.

"Avatar, it is such an honor to have you as our guest!" An old man, who had introduced himself as the town mayor, thanked them for the third time for having shown up.

"Well, it is good to be here", Sokka said awkwardly, and added more quietly to Aang and Katara, "Wherever here is."

"How did you know I'm the Avatar?"

"Why, we recognized you, of course . We have heard much about the good deeds you have done for our Kingdom. You are an inspiration to us all", the overly exuberant mayor continued praising their heroics.

He was a man in his seventies with a gray beard. The mayor's looks and attitude reminded Aang a bit of the Elders of his home temple, and this made Aang like the man already.

It shouldn't be too hard to get these people to help us in our quest to save the world, Aang thought. It felt good to be appreciated, too.

True to their word, the villagers agreed to help them the best they could. They showed Sokka where they were on the map and provided them with new supplies.

The village was poor and remote, so they did not have enough grains to feed Appa, but luckily Aang could send the bison to explore the mountains and find food for himself.

Aang felt sad watching Appa go. The monk knew he was being childish when he wanted to keep the bison constantly around so that he would have a way to take off whenever he felt like. Ever since he had lost his glider, Aang had felt so very... earthbound.

The people of Kyoshi Island had been kind enough to give him a pair of fans to fight with, but there were things you could do with an airstaff that the fans did not help with. Flying was one of them. Aang had tried.

Aang's attention was snapped back to the present by hushed voices whispering all around him. There was some kind of commotion going on, and the crowd of curious spectators surrounding Aang, Katara and Sokka made way for a new group of people.

"Avatar Aang! What a fortunate thing we are to meet!" a tall and broad-shouldered man in his thirties greeted him.

The man was dressed in traditional Earth Kingdom greens, and he had a bright green wristband on his left wrist. He was leading a group of ten people, and they were all wearing similar wristbands. The bands had insignia on them, but Aang didn't recognize it.

"My name is Shen, and I am the leader of the Earth Kingdom Militia", the leader of the group continued.

"The what now?" Sokka blurted out, but Shen didn't appear to take offense.

The man smiled a calm and confident smile and continued to speak: "I am not certain you have heard of us, but it is truly a blessing we are to run into each other. My Militia is, after all, fighting the same fight as you are, and I believe it would be in everyone's best interest for us to coordinate our actions."

"You, too, are fighting the Fire Nation?" Katara asked. "That's great! Just the other day, we were telling these earthbenders who had been imprisoned by Fire Nation that they should fight for their

homes."

Shen smiled at Katara. "Yes, so we have heard. It was very brave of you and you were right to do so. Every man, woman and child of this Kingdom should be ready to fight for their homes. So know this: you are not alone in your quest for justice. We, the citizens of Earth Kingdom, are ready to fight for our rights. This oppression has lasted far too long, but now that you, the Avatar, have returned, my Militia and I are ready to stand behind you as you set the wrongs of the world right."

"Did you hear that?" Katara asked enthusiastically, turning to speak to Aang and Sokka. Aang smiled back at her. This was good news.

"Yeah, it is nice to hear you feel that way, and it is good to meet you all", Aang said and bowed to Shen and his men.

Shen bowed back and continued: "I am glad we have an understanding. Now, it would be my honor to invite you to join me and my men for a dinner. Afterwards, we could discuss the specific plans each of us has for the future."

"A dinner? Now you're talking", Sokka pitched in.

ooo

The food was so good it made Sokka feel envious of all the things the Earth Kingdom could grow. Half of these things would never last on the Poles, and even a devout carnivore like he had to admit that these vegetables were tasty.

Also, you had to give the Militia some credit for being hospitable hosts; offering a good meal before talking business. It would be easier to focus on war planning with a full stomach.

Sokka, Katara, Aang, the Militia people and some of the villagers had gathered into a large, wooden dining hall. The sleazy mayor had called it the city hall, and it was much grander than the other buildings. During the meal the Avatar and his group got to know more about the Militia.

It turned out that the Earth Kingdom Militia was a kingdom-wide organization consisting mostly of ordinary citizens who wanted to help with the war, and it was lead by Shen and his trusted men. Listening the Militia men joked amongst themselves reminded Sokka of his father Hakoda and how the men of the tribe acted together. He had a good feeling about this.

The dinner was just about over and Shen looked like he was ready to start the talks.

"So, Avatar Aang", Shen began, "What do you intend to do first as the Avatar?"

Aang exchanged looks with the Water Tribe siblings. Sokka gave him an encouraging nod.

"Well, the thing is, I haven't really mastered all the four elements yet", Aang answered honestly. "In fact, I only know airbending, so

first, we are going to travel to the Northern Water Tribe to learn waterbending."

"Sounds reasonable", Shen agreed. "What about after you've mastered all the elements? What will you do then?"

"Aang is going to stop the Fire Nation, of course", Sokka answered on Aang's behalf.

"Yes, of course. Do you already have a plan on how to accomplice this goal?" Shen wondered.

Again, their team exchanged looks before Aang replied: "Um, no. Not really."

"But we still got plenty of time to think of _something_", Sokka added, not wanting to sound like they were just aimlessly drifting around, which was actually pretty much what they had been doing so far.

Shen smiled at him and nodded. "But am I to understand that you are not opposed to the idea of taking part in fighting even before you have reached your other goals?"

"Yeah, sure", Sokka said. "I mean, we kind of can't avoid it, what with the Fire Nation trying to capture Aang and all. Plus, it is about time someone showed those Fire Nation scums that they don't get to do whatever they want and get away with it."

"Indeed. All those who mean to sustain the unjust structures of the world should be held accountable", Shen affirmed.

That's one way of putting it.

"Okay, so what about you guys? Have you got some kind of plan?" Sokka inquired.

Now it was Shen's turn to exchange looks with his men before answering. "In fact, we too have already began our fight against the oppressing class in many Earth Kingdom counties. For example, in this region, we have confiscated Fire Nation supplies, and with the profits gathered from those supplies, we have founded several new schools to replace the ones that were destroyed in the war. Or were never built in the first place, despite the population growth."

Shen looked to one of his trusted men, a slim guy about the same age as the leader, and the other man nodded and continued for him:

"Indeed. Organizing public education available to everyone is one of our main goals. The state of the current school system is, well, appalling. We haven't yet been able to achieve as much as we would have liked on that area, but our movement gains new members every day, and soon the official legislators can no longer keep ignoring us."

"A quick question: what do schools have to do with defeating the Fire Nation?" Sokka had to ask, even at the risk of sounding stupid.

"Right now in our Kingdom only the wealthy can get an education It has always been this way, but times are changing, and the Kingdom has

to change with them. I would go as far as saying that lack of education is one of the single greatest concerns of our country, since it limits the opportunities the poor have to improve their situation", Shen answered.

His voice got a new layer of passion to it as he went on: "When only the ruling class gets an education, they will always remain the ruling class. And when only a handful of rich and influential noble families hold all the power in the land, nothing will ever change. For a hundred years, this war has taken its toll especially on the poor living in the countryside. Many farmers have had to leave their homes and become refugees, and without any other education than how to grow crops, they have little chance of obtaining wealth in a city."

"How can our country ask us to die for it when it gives us nothing in return?" Now Shen was really getting fired up. The members of Militia around him were nodding their heads.

Shen banged his fist on the table to emphasize his agitation. "In our Kingdom's current state, it is not a kingdom worth fighting for. Therefore we demand change, and we demand it now."

The last part got some of the men shouting small whoopees.

"I understand what you are saying", Katara cut in, "but shouldn't getting rid of Fire Nation still be your first priority?"

"It has been our Kingdom's first and only priority for a hundred years, but even a war does not excuse a hundred years without social change. If we don't make something happen now, we never will."

Suddenly Aang, who had been pretty quiet thus far, shot up from his seat. "But you are Earth Kingdom! You're supposed to be stable and conservative, like your element. You're not supposed to rebel."

"Even the stablest of rocks will rumble down when pushed hard and long enough", Shen replied, his gaze unwavering.

Aang waved his hands in the air, as if trying to grasp some invisible thread of logic. "But you are supposed to be patient. You're supposed to be about tradition"

Okay, Aang seriously needs to stop telling the Earth Kingdom people what they are supposed to be like.

"Children of earth are all about traditions", Shen agreed, "but if those traditions no longer serve the people, we should create new ones. If our leading generals no longer work for all of their kingdom, but only for the people living in the big cities, they should be replaced."

"Another quick question: if the Army, which is being led by the current generals, doesn't want new ones, then what?" Sokka asked, although he had a feeling he already knew the answer.

"Then they will be replaced by force", Shen replied solemnly.

"But more fighting won't solve anything", Aang was almost pleading, "And you can't fight your own countrymen!"

"There will be change", Shen, too, was now on his feet. "We will be heard, even if we have to knock down the great wall of Ba Sing Se ourselves and demand an audience with the Earth King."

"We could start with King Bumi", another Militia member added. "Omashu is much closer, and they have helped their surrounding counties almost as little as Ba Sing Se has."

Oh great, now there will be no stopping Aang.

To prove Sokka right, Aang almost yelled: "You can't attack Omashu! King Bumi is a great ruler!"

The Militia men were starting to give Aang annoyed looks, and Sokka decided he had to intervene: "Look, Aang, I get what you are saying, but let's cut them some slack here. After all, we don't know much about how King Bumi or the Earth King actually rule their people. It might also be a matter of public appearance. At least to me, Bumi didn't come across as the most sane leader of all time. I mean, I suppose you know him better than we do, but then again, you weren't the one who had to almost suffocate because of, well, a madman's whim."

Aang turned to look at Sokka with innocent surprise on his face: "I'm sure he wouldn't have let that happen..."

"I'm sure he wouldn't have, but Sokka is right", Katara said, surprising even Sokka. Ever since Aang had come along, she had pretty systematically taken his side in arguments, acting like the Avatar could do no wrong.

Now Sokka's sister went on: "If their chief isn't doing his job well, they should elect a new one."

"Exactly", Shen said to Katara.

"But the Earth Kingdom is much bigger than your tribe, and they are not as unanimous. How could they ever elect a leader even half the Kingdom would be pleased with?" Aang started to sound desperate.

"Look, guys", Aang continued. "I understand that you are upset, but this is a bad idea. If the Earth Kingdom doesn't stand united against the Fire Nation, how can you win this war?"

"Excuse me, but I was under the impression that it was the Avatar's job to stop the Fire Nation", Shen said coolly.

Utter silence followed.

ooo

Traveling alone wearing a Fire Nation armor had its risks, especially in an area where the Earth Kingdom Militia was known to be active, but today Zuko had no choice but to take his chances with the rag-tag resistance movement. The Prince had no time to waste if he intended to reach the Avatar before Zhao did.

Zuko had originally planned to travel fast and incognito, so he hadn't taken any of his crew along.

He knew how to move in a hurry without anyone noticing something was out of place, but his crew wasn't as sneaky, and whatever value a few extra hands would have provided in a fight was meaningless if they arrived too late or tipped the Avatar off too early.

That was why Zuko had taken only Uncle along.

About half way to the village the Avatar was supposedly in, they had run across some fresh tracks. Fire Nation troops had gone this way no more than half an hour ago, and Zuko knew in his heart that they were Zhao's men.

Well, at least I no longer have to worry about accidentally tipping the Avatar off that Fire Nation is onto him. If the monk hasn't noticed Zhao's small army heading his way, he is busted already. What would I do then?

Zuko didn't complete that line of thought.

ooo

A young woman wearing a Militia wristband burst into the city hall. "Three Fire Nation ships have anchored to the Halti bay and troops are on their way _here_. We'll have company in fifteen minutes."

Shen got up and started handing out orders to his men. He turned to the Avatar. "We will finish this conversation later, but now you and your friends have to hide."

"No! If the Fire Nation is attacking your village, we are not going to run and hide. We will stay here and help you fight them", Katara said and got to her feet.

"We appreciate the gesture, but you staying to fight is the last thing we need you to do. The Fire Nation is coming here to either find us or you, maybe both, and the best thing for the village is that they find neither of us", Shen explained.

"There is no time for the Militia to evacuate back to our base, so we must all hide. The Militia can do that by simply taking off our wristbands, but you have to go underground. Ilya here is a bender. She'll create a hiding place for you."

All three children started to argue simultaneously, but Shen raised his hand and continued: "You can fight, so can the Militia, but even if we would fight and win, the Fire Nation might return to retaliate on the village. The best thing for everyone is that they find _none_ of us here. So I beg you to do as I have asked."

"Fine", Aang said.

"But we're not going_ underground",_ Sokka added. "We need to be hiding somewhere where we can monitor the situation, you know, in case something goes wrong."

Shen didn't look pleased, but he turned to Ilya. The girl thought for a moment and smiled. "I've got the perfect place in mind. Follow me."

ooo

"Where is the Avatar? Where are you hiding him?"

Zhao's patience was running thin. He and his men had searched the entire village from top to bottom and had thus far found no evidence of the Avatar's presence.

Zhao had no doubt that the Air Nomad had either just fled or these peasants were hiding him. Either way, the Commander knew who to blame.

"So be it", Zhao said calmly and turned to his men, "burn the village. All of it."

A young Earth Kingdom boy took a step forward and shouted: "We are not afraid of you!"

A vicious smile crossed Zhao's lips. He would personally teach this insolent young man a thing or two about respect. The villagers did not take him seriously, but they would after this.

Zhao turned and launched a _massive_ two-hand fireblast towards the youngster.

ooo

Zuko and Uncle had entered the village unnoticed. The commotion caused by the search on the village had ensured that no one had given a second thought to two more people in Fire Nation uniforms.

Zuko had intended to conduct a search of his own once Zhao had left, but now that was off the table.

Is he mad?!

This was exactly the kind of behavior that gave all of Fire Nation a bad name, and as a commander, Zhao should have led by example. On a more personal note, it was just plain wrong to hand out punishments arbitrarily.

Zuko felt a bit like a hypocrite for thinking that way, since in Zhao's shoes, he too would have _threatened_ the villagers. There was absolutely no doubt that the Avatar had been here, after all. But Zuko would not have gone through with his threats. He would not have attacked civilians, especially without any evidence of their guilt.

When Zhao turned around and attacked a random bystander, Zuko made his decision. Consequences aside, he would be damned before he'd let _this_ happen under his watch.

"NO!"

(())(())

****A/N****

To be continued. In the meantime, feel free to comment on how you like the events of the fic so far.

7. Zhao's Secret

****7. Zhao's Secret****

"We have got to do something" Aang said, his voice worried but determined.

"No! You can't intervene", Ilya replied, biting her lip. "Shen made it very clear that everyone is going to end up in more trouble if you show yourselves."

"How could they possibly get into more trouble than this?! That Commander guy is going to burn the whole village down unless we do something", Sokka pointed out.

Katara tried to focus on what the others were saying, but her thoughts kept escaping to the events on the street below.

He is here. He has followed us here. And he is a prince. But what is he doing now?

ooo

A proper Agni Kai required all sorts of preparations, but Zhao and Zuko were on the same page about this one being handled according to the short ceremony. Neither of them even bothered with taking off their armors. That always left the risk that one or both were hiding concealed weaponry, but Zuko trusted that Zhao wouldn't resort to playing dirty in front of all his men.

Zuko walked over to Uncle and gave him the six small blades he always had with him, hidden in various places on his armor. Zuko was sure that Iroh would give him a lecture on how foolish his rash behavior was, but the older man simply took the knives and nodded.

"No lecture?"

"Not this time", Uncle answered. "I am proud of you for standing up for what you believe in. Extremely worried, but proud."

Zuko was surprised by Uncle's words, but there was no time for a groundbreaking conversation.

As Zuko turned to look at his adversary, he saw that Zhao, too, was done giving orders to his second in command.

"Remember your basics", Uncle shouted after Zuko as the Prince walked towards their improvised battle arena.

I'm guessing that is Uncle's way of saying 'don't use secret illegal firebending abilities you're not supposed to have'.

Although the village was small, the main street was wide enough for an Agni Kai.

Zuko wasn't sure how much the villagers understood of what was going on, but at least they had had the sense to back off and make space for the actual audience.

Why fight Fire Nation when they, for a change, prefer to fight each other?

Zuko reached as good a spot as any, turned his back on Zhao and knelt. A small prayer to Agni was one of those ceremonies that were never skipped.

Master Kurita had made Zuko memorize several traditional and less traditional Fire Nation prayers, but Zuko didn't feel like bothering the spirits over this. Instead he took the moment to calm himself, took deep breaths and planned his first moves.

Zuko got up and turned around. He would not fail.

Zhao was up already, a confident smile on his face.

The crowd around them consisted of Zhao's men and a few curious Earth Kingdom civilians. The noise was enough to drown out Zhao's next words, but Zuko could read them from the man's lips: _This will be over soon._

For a moment, both men just stared at each other. The audience grew quiet, sensing the almost tangible hostility in the air.

Zuko knew exactly what to do. Countless times Mizzra had told him that the best advice to remember in a fight was 'appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak'.

To Zhao, the only thing more important than an easy victory was that the victory _looked_ easy, since the Commander wouldn't want anyone to mistake them for _equals_. Therefore Zhao would try to end the fight as quickly as possible by overpowering his opponent, and Zuko would provide him with the kind of adversary he was expecting.

If Zuko played his hand right, Zhao would be down before he had time to know what hit him.

One lame turtle-duck coming right up. Mizzra, I'll make you proud.

Zhao was the first to tire of the waiting. He sent a surprisingly small firebolt, which Zuko redirected without difficulty.

Testing the ice, are we? Two can play that game.

Zuko's counterattack wasn't much more impressive, but he tried to make his expression look like he was pissed and giving this his all.

As Zuko had expected, Zhao was determined to end this fast. The Commander began a series of firefists, simultaneously advancing on Zuko. Zuko did equally many whirling kicks to block them. Zuko's choice of block was a bit of an overkill, but hopefully Zhao would interpret it as a mistake made by an inexperienced fighter.

The triumphant Commander got closer and closer until Zuko 'could no longer block his attack and had to roll over to dodge it'.

Here is your chance. Take it!

As Zhao prepared to finish Zuko off, Zuko made his move.

The Prince got back on his feet lightning fast, creating a small arc of fire for camouflage. Zhao had to lift his hands to keep the fire from hitting his face, leaving his center wide open.

Zuko did a fast and powerful back rotation kick, partially to please Iroh by using a basic technique. The Prince had a wide arsenal of more advanced katas at his disposal, but not everyone here had to know that.

A massive arc of flame threw Zhao a city block away. The Commander landed still twirling.

Zuko ran over to Zhao so that when the man finally recovered enough to look up, all he could see was Zuko's fist ready to strike him down.

Zhao grimaced. There was a flash of fear in his eyes.

"Do it!" The downed Commander shouted.

And Zuko did. Though not to Zhao's face. Zuko's finishing blow hit the ground a few inches from the man's head.

Zuko looked up and addressed Zhao's troops: "I, Prince Zuko, order you to retreat back to your ships. Immediately."

As no one objected loud enough for him to hear it, and Zuko had an excellent hearing, the Prince was pleased with the outcome.

Zuko turned to walk back to Uncle, who appeared serene and respectful but whose eyes were filled with relief and pride. Suddenly Uncle's face fell.

Zuko turned around just in time to redirect a large firebolt about to hit him in the back, and sent it above himself instead.

_You don't _do_ that! _Zuko was in such a state of fury and disbelief that he did the first kata that came to mind without stopping to consider which one.

The Prince used a slower kata to charge his hand so that when he eventually punched it towards the ground, a fireblast the shape of a dragon sprang to life and charged at the Commander.

Zhao didn't have time to dodge or even attempt a block. Zuko's dragon swept the floor with him.

The hit wasn't really as bad as it looked. There was power behind it, but not much heat. Zuko didn't need to check to know that Zhao would be hurting for a couple of days, but he would make a full recovery.

No scars.

Zuko had been so distracted by his fury that only when one of Zhao's men shouted and pointed behind him he realized something _else_ was also going on.

"Look, it's the Avatar!"

Zuko turned around and could barely believe his eyes. Apparently, one of the fireblasts had set a decorative tapestry on fire and, as advertised, behind it sat Aang and his friends.

Oh, just my luck.

ooo

Oh, this is just typical. Of course they had to throw their fire right this way. I bet this sort of stuff never happened to Avatar Kyoshi.

Sokka preferred to have a plan before taking action. That was a luxury they could no longer afford, so it was time to act.

All of Team Avatar burst into motion. Aang began by doing a few sweeping attacks with his fans, throwing half a dozen Fire Nation soldiers off their feet.

The Militia joined in the fight, as well, and unsuspecting firebenders were tackled from behind.

"There's too many of them. We have to lure them out of the village", Sokka summarized the situation to Katara and Ilya. "Also, a diversion wouldn't hurt."

"I can provide some cover", the earthbender girl said and jumped off the roof. As she hit the street, small fissures spread from around her, causing the earth to shake very slightly. It was nowhere near enough to throw anyone off their feet, but when Ilya thumped both her fists to the ground, dust burst from the cracks. With help from Aang's airbending, the dust cloud quickly spread across the main street, limiting everyone's line of sight to a few meters.

Good thinking. They can't throw fire at random. If they do, they are likelier to hit their own than us.

"Okay. Aang, Katara, follow me." Sokka landed from the rooftop and began heading towards the town's secondary gate. Katara was right on his heels. Aang jumped up and down between the streets and the rooftops, moving in his usual, unpredictable and airy way, throwing away firebenders whenever they stumbled in his way.

Sokka spotted an unwitting firebender and hurled his boomerang at the man, knocking him out. Then he heard someone calling his name, turned around and saw Shen approaching.

The Militia leader was carrying a hammer in his hands, and the weapon made him look much more menacing than before. He was followed by Ilya and another Militia member whose name Sokka didn't know.

"Sokka, you have to get the Avatar out of here", Shen ordered.

"I'm like fifteen seconds ahead of you on that", Sokka replied.

Shen nodded and added: "We still need to talk. When you are safe, rendezvous with us by the little pond roughly the shape of a star, North-East of the village."

Sokka nodded and kept running.

ooo

The Avatar's tricks didn't fool Zuko for one minute. The airbender and his gang were obviously headed towards the southern entrance to the village, and Zuko intended to beat them to it.

The Prince ran across the chaotic battlefield, scaling a wall a few times when a bulky Militia guy got in his way.

Zuko felt betrayed. He had stood up for these people when he had thought they were unarmed civilians, but, to prove Zhao right, the villagers had turned out to be hiding the Earth Kingdom Militia as well the Avatar.

Zuko felt like a naive fool, but he didn't have time to be hard on himself. He still had to fight his way out of this mess and capture the Avatar.

Also, the Prince didn't really regret his actions. Although the town was mostly made of stones, it would have still burned nicely, destroying these people's homes and lives. Zuko would not have let that happen in any case.

Still, a small show of gratitude couldn't possibly have killed these people. Apparently, if there was something Zuko could count on, it was his luck, or more exactly, the lack of it.

A flash of orange informed Zuko his hunch had been correct. The young monk was on top of a nearby building, headed south.

Zuko reached for the hidden knife on his belt, only to be reminded that he had left all his weapons with Uncle. With four leaps he scaled the wall next to him and hauled himself on the roof.

The Avatar did not notice Zuko's move, but Katara did. The waterbender was standing on ground level, and from there, she sent a small wave of water in an attempt to knock Zuko down.

Zuko ducked for cover behind a chimney, and in the meanwhile Aang landed, and he and Sokka ran for the town gate. Before the Prince had time to go after them, Katara sent another burst of water, this time in front of Zuko to block his way. Zuko jumped back down to meet his attacker face to face.

"You won't hurt Aang or anyone else again. I won't let you."

"Are we really going to have to go through this again?" Zuko shot back, irritated that the girl still had it in for him.

"As many times as it takes for justice to be served. You are evil and it is time you paid for it."

"You are angry at me for using you to find the Avatar", Zuko said.
"That I understand. I would be, too. But I didn't kill your mother."

"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO SPEAK OF MY MOTHER!"

Zuko realized his poor choice of topic a moment too late. Katara's waterbending was powered by her strong emotions, and now she called more water to her aid from a nearby well.

Her charges were now fiercer, but her aim was still all over the place. Zuko rolled over to duck an attack and simultaneously grabbed a fist-sized rock from the ground. In lack of more sophisticated projectiles, Zuko threw the rock at Katara. It hit her in the middle of her body, knocking the air out of her.

Zuko didn't remember where exactly waterbenders drew their power from, but he hoped losing one's breath was as damaging for other benders as it was for firebenders.

The Prince had to break Katara's focus before she would use her water to slice him into sushi. Zuko had fought waterbenders a few times before, and some of them knew pretty dirty tricks.

As the Prince had hoped, Katara gasped and all the water she had been holding fell to the ground.

Katara wasn't down yet, though. Before Zuko had time to reach her, she was already preparing a new assault.

"You... you... you monster! You had no right to look into my mind!" Katara shouted and sent another wave at Zuko. Zuko blocked it with his fire, and closed in on Katara.

With his usual anger to power him, Zuko would have probably taken her down by now. Instead he was holding back. Hesitating, when he should have been acting, for as hard as he tried, Zuko couldn't erase Katara's words from his mind.

She is right. I saw more than I ever had the right to, and she did nothing to deserve that.

Zuko wanted to say he was sorry, but there was nothing he could do to make up for his intrusion.

Well, almost nothing.

Zuko placed his next steps carefully and purposefully. He danced around Katara and before the waterbender had time to call forth her water, Zuko grabbed her hands and twisted them behind her.

For a brief moment, their bodies were so close to one another that Zuko could feel Katara's heart beat.

ooo

Before Katara had time to struggle, the Prince let go of her hands. The abrupt change in balance caused Katara to fall on her face, but when she got up, the boy was nowhere to be seen.

She looked around herself, trying to locate her enemy.

_No! He couldn't have just vanished. He is only human. He _has_ to be._

A familiar sound cut through to Katara's mind even past her frantic thoughts. _It's Aang. He's calling for Appa. Appa is back._

Katara realized she had to move. The longer they stayed in the village the greater the risk of something bad happening to Sokka or Aang. They couldn't afford to stall just because she didn't have what it took to beat Zuko.

Katara ran towards Aang's voice. Rounding the city gate, she saw Aang and Sokka were already climbing atop the bison, calling her to join them. She ran to meet them.

ooo

Normally Zuko would have gone straight for the Avatar, but in this case, he figured he would make more headway by backtracking a little and thus avoiding his fight with Katara. Although Zuko had let the waterbender escape from him on purpose, he had no intentions of letting the Avatar get away.

Zuko ran a short distance back to the village and took cover behind a building. There he ran across a small alley that led to the village's outer wall. After climbing the wall, Zuko could see the Avatar's bison had landed and the Air Nomad was getting ready to flee.

Before Zuko had time to make his move, a small, vicious firebolt hit him in the back. The Prince managed to control his fall so that he fell back on the village side of the wall, where the fall was considerably shorter and the land less rocky.

Upon landing Zuko rolled back on his feet, facing his attacker. It was Zhao.

"You little traitor! You impeded my investigation in order to capture the Avatar yourself, and thus sided with your enemy nation!" Zhao shouted.

_Why is he coming after _me_? I seriously thought he could put our enmity behind him while _the Avatar_ is still around._

Zuko realized that Zhao probably _didn't_ know the Avatar was still around. Which meant that Zuko had to find a way to go after the Air Nomad without tipping the Commander off about his intentions.

Perfect.

Zuko sent a quick firejab Zhao's way, and before the man had time to counter it, Zuko ran straight for him. He tried to push the Commander out of his way, but the other man created a firefist to block Zuko's path completely.

The Prince ducked to the ground and tackled Zhao off his feet. When Zuko finally got past Zhao, he intended to run for the town gate, but Zhao's next words stopped him dead in his tracks.

"If you run from me now, you are no better than your coward mother."

ooo

The Earth Kingdom Militia had more or less retreated from the fight with the help of their dust cover. Regardless, since Commander Zhao was nowhere to be seen, the situation in the village was a mess. No one appeared to be in charge.

When the ten-ton flying bison rose to the air, Iroh weighed his options.

With all the commotion going on on the street, he doubted any of Zhao's men had noticed the Avatar's departure. Thus it provided Iroh with a chance to bring some order to the chaos.

The situation required... crowd control.

"Are you all really so busy standing around acting useless that you have not noticed that the Avatar is escaping?" Uncle stated loudly and pointed at the sky, where the bison could still be seen for a moment before it vanished behind houses and walls.

"Well, aren't you going after him?" Uncle suggested with a more emphatic tone.

"Commander Zhao's orders were to..."

"I am sure that Commander Zhao would be very angry if we lost the Avatar once again", Iroh pointed out. "In fact, the Commander has most likely already gone after the Avatar himself, feeling that your orders under the circumstances should be rather self-evident. The Avatar is, after all, the greatest single threat to our Nation's war campaign. The standing orders to all Fire Nation soldiers are to do anything it takes to arrest him, so I suggest you return to your ships as fast as you can, so that you stand a chance of following the Avatar."

Zhao's second in command looked convinced enough. He nodded and ordered all the troops to retreat immediately back to the main gate and then to Halti Bay.

Uncle was relatively certain that if Zhao had been there, the first thing the Commander would have done was to find someone to blame, and that would have put them all back exactly where they started.

This way, the village would be spared for the time being. With little luck, Zhao's troops might even take off without their Commander, and that would give Zhao someone else to take his anger and frustrations out on.

Iroh was slightly concerned for his own and his nephew's safety once the Fire Nation forces were no longer present, but that was a minor inconvenience considering how badly the situation could have ended for everyone.

The part that truly worried Uncle was that Commander Zhao was indeed nowhere to be seen. Nor was Zuko, and somehow Iroh guessed

those two things weren't unconnected.

ooo

Zuko was used to insults, implied and blatant, but Zhao's was so exotic and unexpected that, for a moment, the Prince completely forgot his hunt.

"Did you just _insult my mother_?" Zuko was almost shouting as he turned to look at the downed man.

Zhao said nothing, but somehow Zuko got the impression that there was more meaning behind the words than a bad loser trying to find new ways to insult his enemy.

"My mother was _not_ a coward."

Zuko could have walked away then. There was no reason why he shouldn't. None but the nagging doubt that Zuko had thought he had put behind him years ago, but that Zhao had brought to surface once more.

What happened to my mother?

It was unlikely that Zhao knew more on the topic than Zuko himself did, but he had to be sure.

To the older man's surprise, Zuko walked back towards him. Obviously expecting an attack, Zhao tried to keep Zuko away, but the teenager blocked the Commander's hit and grabbed his hand.

Time to get to the bottom of this.

ooo

Six years ago

_Sergeant Zhao was irritated. He had always been a natural leader among his peers. He had always been a promising firebender, even if Jeong Jeong was too bitter and jealous to admit it. Still, no one was willing to _acknowledge_ his accomplishments._

The Orion was a medium-sized battle cruiser running supply runs between the Fire Nation and its Earth Kingdom outposts. It was hardly the sort of mission that paved one's way to glory, so for the time being, Zhao's military career was on the hold.

It was past midnight but Zhao couldn't sleep, so he passed his time by walking around the ship's corridors. Since they were out on the ocean, there was no need to keep constant security patrols going. Therefore Zhao hadn't met a soul on his walk to the ship's deck.

The only thing that made their current trip slightly more interesting than the past dozen or so ones was their mystery passenger. No one on the crew knew who he was or even what he looked like, because he had entered the ship wearing an all-covering, old-fashioned widow's attire, and hadn't left his room since.

_Only the Captain of Orion was allowed to go into that room, which

meant that the rumors and speculations among the crew were beyond wild by now._

_Zhao himself presumed that the man was one of Fire Lord's spies on a secret mission that required keeping his identity to himself. If Zhao was right, and he was relatively sure he was, the truly interesting question was _which Fire Lord _had sent him._

The night the Orion had left her last harbor was also the night Fire Lord Azulon had passed away peacefully in his sleep.

Sending this spy could have been the old man's last act, but an even more intriguing scenario was that it had been Fire Lord Ozai's first act. What could be so important that even before his coronation, Ozai had sent a spy into the dead of night on a secret mission?

_Now _there_ lay a mystery that Zhao would have loved to get to the bottom of. Knowledge was, after all, a good way to power._

The Orion would reach her destination tomorrow morning, so Zhao didn't have much time left to investigate this. Also, try as he might, he couldn't think of a way to get inside the room without blatantly disobeying a direct order.

_Zhao walked up a ramp that led to the deck of the ship. He hoped that the cool night air would help him think more clearly. _

There, on the moonlit deck, stood a figure.

"_Who are you?" Zhao demanded to know as he walked towards the stranger._

_The hooded figure startled and turned to look at Zhao. To his surprise, it was no one on the crew, but Zhao recognized the face anyway. _

Shocked and not knowing what else to do, Zhao knelt on the deck. "Lady Ursa... Fire Lady Ursa. My sincerest apologies. I didn't realize anyone was out here this late."

Lady Ursa looked wary, but her tone was polite. "Just Lady Ursa. You may rise"

Zhao lifted his head. The mystery passenger_, Zhao realized, _isn't a spy at all._

Lady Ursa was wearing a multilayered gown. On top of that she had a plain traveling cloak and a scarf that could be worn to cover her face entirely but that was at the moment loosely hanging around her neck.

No jewelry or other obvious signs of power. No Fire Nation insignia.

Zhao didn't have to see Ursa's displeased reaction to his presence to know that he had just stumbled upon something he wasn't supposed to know anything about. A man with more tact might have made his exit right about then, but Zhao wasn't about to walk away from such an intriguing encounter. He tried to quickly think of something polite to say.

"_Is there anything I can do for you? Something I could bring, perhaps?"_

"_No."_

"_May I ask what you are doing here?"_

Ursa hesitated before answering: "I came out here to admire the scenery."

Not what I was asking and you know it, _Zhao thought. He would have to approach this from a different angle. Something was definitely wrong about this picture, and Zhao intended to find out what._

"_I'm... deeply sorry for your recent loss in the family," Zhao said._

Now Lady Ursa turned for the first time to really look at Zhao. He could see hints of panic under her composed features.

"_My loss?" Ursa said, "Zuko.. my children. Has something happened to them?"_

Zhao was baffled. He couldn't come up with anything wittier than the truth: "No, my lady. I was referring to Fire Lord Azulon's passing."

Somehow, Zhao's words made Ursa look sullen, and almost angry. Zhao made a mental note of that before adding: "I am sure your children are fine."

Why wouldn't they be?

There was such hatred in Lady Ursa's next words that Zhao would have taken a step back if he had not still been kneeling on the ground.

"_Fire Lord Azulon was _not_ a member of my family."_

Zhao was surprised and shocked by her words but tried to look politely indifferent.

No one_ spoke of the Fire Lord in that tone. No loyal citizen, at least. Zhao was cautiously optimistic he had just been handed the key to unraveling this mystery._

"_What is going on here?" an authoritative voice asked from behind Zhao. As Zhao saw who it was, the Sergeant hastily got up and saluted his commanding officer. "Captain Ping."_

"_Sergeant Zhao, what do you think you are doing out here?" The Captain asked, irritation and worry blatant in his voice._

"_It is alright", Lady Ursa said to Ping, who in response bowed deeply at the noble woman. Deeply, but he did not kneel all the way to the ground._

Someone has fallen out of grace, _Zhao noted._

Captain Ping commented on the cold night air and suggested that Lady Ursa would be more comfortable back in her room. Ursa bowed and walked away from the two men.

"_Why are you out here?" the Captain demanded from Zhao as soon as Lady Ursa was out of hearing range._

"_Just making sure everything was in order before we make land in a few hours", Zhao tried to sound respectful, yet unapologetic._

The old Captain's face wrinkled as he considered the situation, but finally, he sighed and asked: "How much do you know?"

"_Only that we have a high-ranking guest on board our ship. Though I do wonder, why the crew was not informed of Lady Ursa's presence. I am sure everyone would have considered it a great _honor_", Zhao said as innocently as he could._

"_She will leave this ship first thing tomorrow morning. Officially, she was never here. You may tell no one of what you have seen or heard tonight. Am I making myself clear?"_

"_Chrystal, sir", Zhao bowed deeply and added, "I live to serve the Fire Lord's commands."_

Captain Ping did not deny Zhao's presumptions, which was as good as admitting they were correct.

She is a traitor, and the Fire Lord has banished her for it. It is being kept a secret to avoid a scandal.

Two weeks later, Zhao received a letter from the Fire Nation informing him that he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant for his exceptional services to his Nation. The letter had the Royal Seal on it.

Finally, Zhao had gotten himself noticed.

ooo

Zuko felt nauseous and not just because of the disgusting way Zhao had used his mother's hardship to his advantage. However, there was also a flicker of hope building up in his chest.

She is.. alive?

ooo

Ilya was holding back tears. She was standing by the star-shaped pond. Everyone was standing in silence, waiting for the Avatar to arrive.

Ilya hoped the Air Nomad would show up soon, because she couldn't stand another minute of the tension. It still seemed unreal just how badly she had messed up.

Before Ilya had escorted the Avatar and his friends to the roof, Shen had quietly told her that no matter what happened, she was to make sure the Avatar would not be detected.

A simple enough job she had _completely_ failed at. But worse than letting her team down was that she had let Shen down.

Shen was Ilya's idol. His inspiring words had convinced her to join the Militia in the first place, even against her family's wishes.

Ilya was 18 years old. She understood that the women who were left to take care of the farms and provide food for the soldiers were a crucial part of improving their country, but as an earthbender, she felt she could do more here.

Three of her four brothers were in the Army, and after she had run off to join the Militia, her family had disowned her. They thought the Militia was unpatriotic and against the Army.

The Militia wasn't. They were just against the Army's _bad leadership_. Her family didn't see the difference.

The Militia was her new family, and now she had let them down, too.

The Avatar's bison appeared above them and, in a whoosh, it landed next to the pond. Shen didn't bother with pleasantries. "Are any of you injured?"

"No, we are fine", the Water Tribe boy, Sokka, answered, "but what about you guys? Is everyone okay back at the village?"

"The villagers are fine. The Fire Nation left soon after you did."

What Shen was saying was almost the whole truth. Most of the Fire Nation soldiers had gone immediately after the Avatar, but not all.

An aged firebender giving orders had really taken his time to leave, eerily not intimidated by the fact that he was alone and surrounded by enemy forces.

"Whew, that's a relief", the Avatar said. "I'm glad the whole thing ended well."

Well? Hardly, Ilya thought and rolled her eyes.

"Have you given more thought to my proposal?" Shen asked.

"Your proposal...?"

"That the Avatar and the Earth Kingdom Militia were to join forces in our common battle."

"Oh, yeah. That one", the Avatar said and scratched the back of his head, looking uneasy.

"Maybe we could decide that later. You know, once we have gotten to know each other a little better..." Sokka tried to put in, but the Avatar shook his head.

"No, Sokka", the airbender said. "I have an answer. It is 'no', and it's not going to change."

Shen looked disappointed and even a bit angry, but his voice remained calm: "So be it."

"Look, let me explain", the Avatar continued, looking at everyone around him.

"It's not like I think you are bad people or that your demands are evil. It is just that I am the Avatar, and since it's the Avatar's job to maintain peace in the world, I can't actively support an organization that considers civil war a potential means of reaching its goals. If there ever comes a time when you are willing to have talks and sign treaties, then call me and I will be right there to help you with that, but I won't help you start a revolution."

If the Avatar had meant his little speech to be conciliatory, he really did not understand the Militia.

The Avatar was practically saying that the current leaders had the law on their side and were thus the only side that had any right to enforce their beliefs, effectively reducing the Militia to a bunch of terrorists.

Shen and the other leaders said their farewells to Aang, Sokka and Katara. Perhaps the Avatar and his Water Tribe friends sensed the coolness in the atmosphere, for they did not stick around too long after that.

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"Look, Aang. I think we should talk about what happened back there", Sokka said hesitantly once Appa had gained some altitude.

"You are absolutely right", Katara agreed. "Zuko wasn't there today by accident. He has followed us all the way from the South Pole, and he will keep following us, and that's why we should be prepared for the next time we meet."

He won't catch me off guard three times in a row, Katara promised to herself.

"Um. True, but that wasn't exactly what I was talking about. I meant what happened with the Militia", Sokka said.

"Look, I know you liked them and would have wanted me to help them but I just can't. I'm sort of not even allowed to", Aang defended himself.

"Whoa. I am not trying to accuse you of anything", Sokka said quickly, "and, for the record, I didn't like them all that much. And even if I had, I would have sided with you, because, as we told you back at the Southern Air Temple, you are part of our family now, and family sticks together in that kind of situations."

Katara put her arm around Aang's shoulder to emphasize her brother's words. Aang gave her a weak smile. He was probably still upset that he had not been able to be friends with everyone.

Sokka went on: "We are not in league with the Militia, and we're probably no worse for it, but talking with them made me realize just how big a job we have ahead of us. Keeping that in mind, I think we should have some type of agreement on what exactly it is that we want to happen and what all we are willing to do to make it happen."

"Okay", Aang said, already much cheerier. "That's at least easy. We want to end the war and restore peace and balance to the world."

"Obviously, but I think the real question we should ask ourselves is: what kind of a world are we trying to restore? Again, I say this in the best of ways, but Aang, you are a bit conservative, and I think we should talk about that."

"Conservative? Me? But I'm an airbender. We believe in detaching ourselves from our earthly possessions and seek freedom and harmony. We have a sense of humor and we love practical jokes. Children of Air aren't conservative", Aang said, baffled.

"Probably true, but let's not forget that you are in fact one hundred and twelve years old. It's only natural for someone, who spent the last hundred years inside an iceberg to like things that are still the same way they were before. If I was sent to the future, I would probably think all the changes that happened while I was gone were weird and alien. If I was given a choice, I would want most of the things to go back exactly the way they used to be. Not necessarily because they are now bad, but because they are different.

"A lot has changed while you were gone, and granted, much of it for the worse. I should know, since the Southern Water Tribe has lost more than most others in the last century, but I still believe that at least some of the changes were necessary and even good.

"What I am trying to say is that when we do restore balance to the world and all that, I bet there is going to be even more changes after that, and you are going to be in a position to help decide which of those changes happen and which don't."

"But", Aang mumbled, sounding miserable. "How am I supposed to decide all that? I'm just a twelve-year-old and I don't have Gyatso or other wise, old people to help me."

"You have us", Katara said in a comforting tone. "We will help you, and so will Suki and Haru and all the other friends you are going to make on the way."

"Yeah. We'll help you fight your battles, on the battlefield and off it", Sokka pitched in with an encouraging smile. "But since we still have some way to go before the world is saved, now might be a good time for you to start considering where you stand in all sorts of issues."

Katara understood Sokka's point, but she feared the Air Nomad either did not or would soon forget his worries as they set off to a new adventure. Though, at least for the time being, Aang actually looked thoughtful.

It is a start.

Suddenly, Sokka reached behind Katara's back.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Katara protested until her brother opened his hand. In it was Katara's necklace.

"My necklace!" Katara exclaimed as she took the object from Sokka, "I thought I had lost it for good! Where did you find it?"

Sokka laughed. "All this time, it was hanging from your waterskin. Can you believe that!"

Katara's face fell. There was no way the necklace had been hanging from her clothing all this time. She had checked everywhere about a hundred times. Not to mention that when the necklace had gone missing, she had been a prisoner on a Fire Nation prison rig, pretending to be an earthbender. She didn't have her water skin on her at the time.

Suddenly, a memory of a pair of strong and fast hands holding her own behind her back filled her mind.

No. It's not from him. Where would he have even gotten my mom's necklace? He wasn't there that day, he was somewhere else... following us..._

"Katara, are you feeling okay?" Aang asked and came to check her forehead for signs of fever. "You look a bit pale."

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Zuko looked even more pale than usually, but despite Uncle's insistent wishes, the young man had not even touched the strengthening tea Iroh had placed before him.

Iroh had found Zuko and Zhao on the same alley, each looking more upset than the other. As Uncle had started to guide his nephew back to their ship, Zhao had began accusing Zuko of, well... The man hadn't been very explicit, but knowing what Iroh knew, he could guess what had happened between the two.

Whatever had been so important that it had made Zuko reveal his illegal power to the Commander, Iroh could only begin to guess.

Now they were safely back in Zuko's room onboard the ship. Uncle had not insisted on answers; he knew his nephew well enough to know the boy didn't respond well to being interrogated. So, instead Iroh waited patiently. Zuko would tell him when he was ready to tell him, and no sooner.

"Uncle", Zuko finally began, and looked up from his hands. "Have you given the crew any orders regarding our next heading?"

"No, but if you would like me to, I could order them to keep heading north as usual."

"No. It's fine", Zuko said and bit his lip. "Actually, I was thinking that we would not go after the Avatar today."

Uncle almost choked on his tea but managed to compose himself and reply: "That would probably be wise. A man needs his rest, and I think a small vacation would do a world of good to the crew as well."

Zuko nodded absently.

"I read Zhao", the boy said, his tone oddly hollow. "I found out that my mother could be alive."

For once, Iroh did not know what to say.

Zuko went on quickly: "So, I was thinking that we could take a few days off and try to look into that, you know. To make sure."

Instead of going after the Avatar, was the part left unsaid.

Iroh felt conflicted. On one hand, it was probably a good thing Zuko had other things on his mind than his obsession with the Avatar. On the other hand, his nephew was still very young and vulnerable, and Iroh feared that going to look for Ursa could open up some old wounds.

Eventually, Iroh nodded, because he knew that Zuko had already made his decision, and the boy had surely given this a lot of thought. Zuko wouldn't abandon his quest lightly.

Uncle wanted to support his nephew and help him find his own way, and if today that meant taking a closer look at tragic events from Zuko's past, he would be right there by his nephew's side.

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Zuko tried to fall asleep, although he knew it was unlikely he could tune out his thoughts long enough for that to happen. Zuko had never been a heavy sleeper (when you sleep, people you care about disappear), and after the Agni Kai he had hardly slept at all.

Zuko had always thought his mother had died six years ago. No one had actually told him that, but he had always believed so, because he knew his mother would never have abandoned him.

However, if she was alive, Zuko had to find her, even at the risk of losing the Avatar to Zhao.

For all he knew he was chasing ghosts, but if there was even a small chance that Ursa was alive and in trouble and needed his help, Zuko had to be there to give it.

If I lose the Avatar, I can never go home. I will never become the Fire Lord. I will never see Azula or my Father again.

And somehow, if Zuko could get his mother back, it wouldn't all be so bad.

(())(())

A/N

Thanks to everyone for your kind reviews!

There is more physical action in this chapter than in the previous ones, and I would like to point out that although I am trying to write a more realistic take on the Avatar world, the fights will maintain the light, nobody-gets-seriously-injured feel that was so very characteristic to the original show's fighting scenes.

This fanfic is, after all, based on a kiddie show, so there will be no blood flying or other gore like that. However, you shouldn't interpret that it means no one is going to get hurt or die in this fic.

And finally, credit where it is due:

"Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak."
"

Sun Tzu

8. Unspoken

****A/N****

Today is the Winter Solstice, aka the darkest day of the year on the Northern Hemisphere (which is pretty dark on the latitudes I live in). Coincidentally, the Winter Solstice is coming up in the Avatar World as well, so watch out for spirits.

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****8. Unspoken****

Seven years ago

"_Oh Zuzu, you're just no fun at all", Azula mocked and twisted her expression into a sneer that did not belong on a seven-year-old's face. Ty Lee giggled and Mai looked solemn._

The summer sun was shining brightly down on the four figures standing in one of the royal gardens. All children were wearing their short sleeved holiday looks to better stand the heat of the day.

Zuko tried to look indifferent. He would not let Azula win this time.

"_I'm not gonna let you do that, Azula. So let the baby rabbiroo go", Zuko tried to sound stern and decisive the way their father did when he really meant it. Somehow, his impersonation was lacking._

Azula narrowed her eyes and smiled, seeing straight through Zuko's weak attempt at intimidation.

She shifted the little animal baby she was holding from one arm to the other, as if demonstrating how she was weighing her options. Azula held one of her fingers on her jaw to further indicate how puzzled she was.

"_Nooo, I don't think I will", she eventually decided._

"_I won't let you hurt it!" Zuko shouted. He was almost sure that Azula had been kidding and was just teasing him, but with Azula, you never knew, and Zuko really didn't want to see the animal get hurt._

"_Well, who is going to stop me? You?" Azula asked with such a skeptic tone that it made Ty Lee giggle some more._

_Zuko glared at Ty Lee for a moment. He hated being laughed at.

_

Ty Lee continued to giggle, but suddenly Zuko realized that there was a nervous edge to her laughter. She was wrinkling up the hem of her dress with her fingers.

She is nervous,_ Zuko realized. _She doesn't want anything bad to happen to that rabbiroo, either.

"_I'll tell Mother", Zuko threatened._

"_Really? You're going to run to Mommy and tell on me?" Azula was still not taking Zuko seriously, and it made him angry._

For a moment, the siblings just stared at one another, neither willing to stand down.

The tension was interrupted by Mai: "Boring."

She yawned a little to emphasize her words, and continued with a completely nonchalant voice: "Can't we go do something interesting, like, say, pick on the new house maid?"

Azula seemed to consider that. The chubby little rabbiroo on her lap looked calm, clearly oblivious to the impending doom that loomed over its head.

Before Azula had time to make up her mind, a familiar voice called for them. "Zuko, Azula. What is going on here?"

Their mother had entered the garden and was walking towards them. She looked as beautiful as always, but also worried. Her eyes were locked on Zuko's clenched fists.

"_Nothing. We're just playing a game and Zuzu is being a sore loser", Azula said innocently._

"_I am not a sore loser!" Zuko exclaimed. _

He turned to Mother, ready to tell her everything about the horrible things Azula had threatened to do to that animal, but something in his mother's eyes stopped him from speaking.

_Ursa was still looking at Azula, her eyes hard. There was something... wrong about the way in which she looked at her _own daughter_. She was already expecting to hear the worst of her._

Zuko was stunned. His mother never looked at him like that.

"_I am not a sore loser", Zuko repeated. "Azula cheated. She didn't explain all the rules beforehand."_

For a split second, Azula's eyes met Zuko's. She looked surprised, but before anyone had time to see her surprise, her face resumed its usual unreadable smile.

Mother looked at Zuko intensely. He knew his face might betray him, so he looked down, as if ashamed to show just how upset he had gotten over a silly game.

"_Ty Lee, Mai. Would you excuse us for a moment?" Ursa eventually said in her usual caring, yet polite tone. "I need to speak with my children."_

Azula pushed the rabbiroo over to Ty Lee, and her friends left hastily, leaving them alone in the yard.

Mother turned to look at both her children with loving worry. "You know I do not like it when you two fight."

"_It was only a game", Azula protested, but Mother raised her hand to indicate she was not done talking._

"_Zuko, you need to be a good big brother to your sister. Azula, stop teasing your brother", Ursa looked at each of her children in turn._

"_I'm trying", Zuko mumbled._

"_Fine. Next time, I'll explain all the rules beforehand", Azula sighed._

Their mother hugged them both, holding them in a loving and warm embrace.

It felt good to be held by Mother, and Zuko liked the way she played with his hair. But the calm of the moment was disrupted by worry. Her worry.

Mother worried because the siege of Ba Sing Se wasn't going well. A messenger had just told her so. Mother was afraid that something bad would happen to their relatives on the battlefield.

"_Is everything alright with Uncle and Lu Ten?" Zuko asked. Even though the summer day was hot, he found himself shivering._

Zuko lifted his gaze to look at his mother. She looked surprised. Azula, too, looked openly curious. Her gaze shifted from Zuko's worried face to what Mother's response would be.

Swiftly, Ursa composed herself and answered: "Your uncle and cousin are fine. Why would you ask such a thing?"

"_It's just", Zuko tried hard to find the right words to explain something he knew to be true in his hear. "I mean, you just seemed so _worried_ for them."_

_Again, Mother looked puzzled. Then, she smiled at him and said with

a reassuring voice: "It is sweet of you to worry for them, but I am sure everything is alright."_

"_Zuko is being weird", Azula teased._

"_Azula", Mother warned Azula to be quiet, and continued to talk to Zuko: "You have always been an emphatic child and there is nothing wrong in that."_

She hugged him tighter one more time, then let go off them both and told them to run along.

As Zuko and Azula headed into the house after Mai and Ty Lee, Azula suddenly elbowed Zuko, saying: "Mother's pet."

Zuko was irritated. He tried to think of a response, but couldn't think of anything to say.

Azula was the one everyone admired; the prodigy who could do no wrong. And still, she was jealous of him. It seemed unbelievable, but Zuko knew it to be true.

She is jealous, because Mother loves me more.

Zuko had never thought it that way, but suddenly he knew for a fact that Azula did.

Azula ran off, leaving Zuko alone in the corridor. The spot on Zuko's arm where Azula had elbowed him didn't ache, but it itched in a funny way.

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The present

A teenager woke up in the middle of a small clearing in a woods. The night sky was still dark, but Katara knew she would not fall asleep easily after a dream like that.

Instead of trying to go back to sleep, she got up and started to go about her morning duties. Aang would be up soon, and Sokka at the very latest when the breakfast was ready.

Still, Katara could not forget her dream. The garden had felt so tangible she almost believed she had been there herself, smelling the exotic flowers and spices and feeling the warm, humid air on her face.

The people had been familiar too. Like acquaintances you had known long ago. The world of the little Fire Nation boy had felt in every aspect... real. Which was more than a little worrisome.

He is already haunting my thoughts more than I would like when I'm awake. Does he really have to invade my dreams as well?

As much as Katara resented the thought, she knew the little child in her dream had been Zuko.

It was impossible to think that their evil pursuer had once been a caring little boy with a baby sister and a loving mother. None of

that matched Katara's idea of the Fire Nation, let alone Prince Zuko.

_Whatever happened to that child t turn him so evil? _She couldn't help but wonder.

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Zuko had made it sound like they would spend two, maybe three days on trying to find out what had happened to his mother. They had been at it for four days now, and there was still no sign of him giving up.

Just because Zuko hadn't found any clues _yet_, didn't mean there were none to be found. He wasn't even close to giving up. There were still many places to search from and many people to ask.

Zuko had began his new hunt from the port where Orion had left his mother almost six years ago. It had been a long shot to think that there would still been signs of her there, but since he was being exceptionally qualified in gathering information, Zuko had wanted to search the place just in case.

After that lead had run cold, they had visited the colonial city of Kala. There, Zuko had broken into the city archives, where records of Fire Nation Colonies' immigration and taxation were kept.

Ursa had most likely not stayed in the colonies for fear of recognition, but if she had, there may have been a mentioning of her in the archives. Most likely not by her own name, but Zuko had hoped to find some type of clue from there. It had turned out to be another dead end.

Now Zuko was sneaking to meet someone who might have the information he needed. This was why the Prince had his ninja outfit on.

The costume had improved much in the last two years, but Zuko still occasionally fine-tuned it here and there, or added a new item. There was always room for improvement.

The boots were knee-high and made of soft leather to enable moving soundlessly. The pants were baggy and made of black silk. He wore a dark tunic that completely covered his skin and had two hoods: a skin-tight one and a larger one, both used to cover Zuko's almost entirely shaved and highly recognizable head.

The loose tunic was tied at waist by a black silk belt. On top of that belt he had another one; a dark brown leather belt that was wider in the front. It served both as a shield for his stomach area and as a good place to hide small throwing knives in.

The costume had black gloves, hand armors made of leather and a leather strap that held the Dao on Zuko's back. It wasn't customary for a firebender to carry swords, or any other weapons, for that matter, because it was seen as a sign of mistrust in one's own bending skills.

Tonight, however, that did not matter. Zuko was not about to let anyone know who he was or that he was a bender. The swords may even prove helpful in misleading people about his true identity.

Tonight, he wasn't Prince Zuko. He was the Blue Spirit.

The crown piece of the costume was a blue opera mask that portrayed said spirit. It had proven useful in both covering his face and in intimidating his opponents.

One should never underestimate the advantage of intimidation. The fear of having to fight a creature that may be a spirit got most adversaries distracted, and some of them even running for cover.

Zuko had used the identity of the Blue Spirit many times before when sneaking around gathering information. The anonymity of the mask was a good way for him to get to use his secret powers without tipping anyone off that he had secret powers.

Consequently, the Blue Spirit had gotten quite a reputation. Rumor had it he could disappear into shadows, walk through walls, see into people's souls and do many other, ridiculous and not so ridiculous things.

Zuko was sneaking into a Fire Nation outpost located on a windy islet just outside the coast of Earth Kingdom. The outpost was medium-sized and rather well-equipped and frequently patrolled. It had taken Zuko all night to sneak deep into the fortress. He knew the sun would rise in a few hours, but he was almost to his target.

No turning back now.

Finally, Zuko reached the door he wanted to be at. He opened it very slowly. Thankfully, the outpost had been kept in good shape, and the hinges of the metal door were well-oiled.

Zuko sneaked in and closed the door behind him. The room was almost completely dark. The only source of light were a few smoldering embers in the fireplace.

The room wasn't large for a Commander's room. With his eyes already adjusted to the darkness, Zuko could make out a writing desk and a bed at the back of the room.

Before moving further, Zuko surveyed the metallic room one last time to see if there were any booby traps. It seemed unlikely that there were, but Zuko didn't know enough about Commander Ping to know how paranoid he usually was about his safety. Most Fire Navy officers who had lasted this long tended to be... cautious.

No traps. Here goes.

Zuko lit a candle on the Commander's desk. In its light, he could see Commander Ping still asleep on his bed. Zuko waited a moment, and soon enough the man's face began reacting to the change of light.

Commander Ping opened his eyes. For a split second he appeared disoriented, but when he realized that there was someone else in his room, the man got up to a sitting firebending stance at once.

Zuko had expected this response and kept his cool.

He was standing in the middle of the room, a few meters from the old man. Looming there, silent and unreadable. Zuko knew the larger hood atop his head created shadows on his masked face, which added to the otherworldliness of his appearance.

"Who are you?" Commander Ping demanded to know.

Zuko cocked his head to the right, not unlike a wolf-bat trying to determine how to best kill its prey.

The movement had the desired outcome. Ping's face flushed with fear and he threw a firebolt at Zuko.

Zuko dissipated the fire with a tiny movement of his hand, but tried to make it look like the flame had vanished on its own. Bending with this small movements required an extra amount of focus and chi, but if Zuko could get through this fight by having to block only one attack, it would be worth it.

Commander Ping looked terrified and asked: "What do you want?"

"Tell me what became of Lady Ursa", Zuko said in a quiet and even voice.

Ping's face dropped. Finally, he answered: "I always knew that would come back to haunt me one day."

"That day has come. Tell me what you know."

The man glanced at him, sighed, and probably decided that this was a dream or something else surreal, so he might as well spill the beans. "I was ordered to transport Lady Ursa from the Fire Nation to Earth Kingdom. I left her at the port of Kemi, and I never saw her after that."

"Who gave you your orders?" Zuko asked.

"Fire Lord Ozai", Ping answered, surprisingly calm under the circumstances.

"Why?"

"I was told that she had been banished, and that I should no longer recognize her status as a member of the royal family. My orders were to escort her out of Fire Nation undetected, but to give her no aid beyond that."

"Is that all?" Zuko asked. Ping nodded, but Zuko had an intuitive feeling there was more to it. Over the years, he had learned to trust his intuition. Even Zuko's mindreading had always been more about intuition than anything else.

Even before entering this fortress, Zuko had decided that he would use the Power of Dragons on Commander Ping. He did not want to leave any stones unturned at this point. That was why he had sneaked in disguised in the first place: this way, the ability would not be as easy to trace back to Prince Zuko.

Zuko could have just sneaked up on a sleeping man and started by

reading his mind. There were, however, many reasons why Zuko had decided to wake Ping up first.

First, reading dreaming minds could be incredibly confusing, and even disturbing.

Second, reading him would be much easier once Ping's mind had already been guided to the right topic. Just because Zuko could read minds did not mean he was exceptionally good at it, and he needed every advantage he could get.

Third, reading Ping would have in any case woken him up and then Zuko might have had to dodge firebolts while still in the middle of reading him.

Also, Zuko had wanted to give the man a chance to explain himself the old-fashioned way.

Still, it didn't hurt to ask first. "You are not telling me everything."

Ping swallowed. He looked distressed, but eventually, he answered: "You are right. I... even though I wasn't supposed to, I gave Lady Ursa some money and a map of the local areas."

"Why?" Zuko asked.

"I just... I know a marriage doesn't always work out, but a man, even the Fire Lord, is responsible for his wife. This was Lady Ursa, the mother to the Fire Lord's children. It did not feel right to leave her with nothing."

Chivalry. Not what Zuko had expected, but the old man's words sounded genuine enough.

"I have heard of you, you know", Commander Ping went on. "The Blue Spirit. Some say you are a thief. Some say you're a hero. Some say you're a ghost."

"And what do you believe?" Zuko asked.

"I don't know", the Commander responded, "but dying by the blade of a stranger seems appropriate enough. I have lead men and women to a similar faith all my life."

Okay, now Zuko was seriously starting to look up to this man.

"I am not going to kill you", Zuko said, and thought: I'm not even going to read you. That is how much I respect you for what you did for my mother.

Ping looked openly surprised and stammered: "But... then I have to kill you, for I have just told you things I have sworn never to tell anyone, so long as I live."

Oh, right. This had been a dying man's last confession. That, in part, explained the honesty.

"You told me nothing I did not already know", Zuko tried to calm the man. "So what do you say we both walk away from this alive?"

Ping thought that over, clearly torn between what his honor demanded and the fact that he didn't want to die.

Eventually, he nodded.

When exiting the islet, Zuko kept thinking to himself: _If I ever become the Fire Lord, I just might have this man lead my Navy._

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"Look, Katara, I've got to ask. What's up between you and the firebender?" Sokka's question came so out of the blue that Katara completely froze.

Finally, she managed an answer: "Nothing. And I think a much more imminent concern to us all should be what we're going to do about the spirit bent on attacking this village at sundown."

"I know, I know, but since there is little we can do about it other than hope that Aang will get it right _intuitively_, now is a good time to talk", Sokka pointed out. "And we do need to talk. Ever since the angry jerk with the ponytail gave you your necklace back, it has been constantly 'Zuko this' and 'Zuko that'. If I didn't know better, I'd think you have a crush on him."

"What?!" Katara shouted. "That is so not true! He is a firebender and he attacked our village and I hate him. Mostly, anyway."

"Katara does not have a crush on a firebender!" Aang put in quickly, suddenly looking more worried than he had looked after hearing he would have to fight an angry spirit.

"Right?" Aang asked from Katara.

"Of course I don't", Katara reassured him, already calmer herself. "Sokka is just being an idiot."

"And he can be an idiot a lot longer than this unless he is gonna get some real answers", Sokka said, speaking of himself in the third persona for no apparent reason.

My idiot brother, Katara thought. _Though, this time, he does maybe have a point._

Katara had been struggling with this herself; wondering whether to tell her friends about Zuko maybe knowing how to read minds or not.

First, she had told herself that there was no need, because she had most likely imagined the whole thing. After their conversation at the Halti village and the weird dream, she had had this morning, she was almost certain that Zuko really could go inside people's heads. And just like Zuko had seen into her memories, she had seen into some of his.

It was time she came clean with the truth.

Katara told them first of the weird way Zuko had made her relive

memories from her past. Memories relating to Aang and her mother. Then she told them that in Halti village Zuko had as good as confirmed that he had seen those memories, too.

Sokka looked displeased and puzzled, Aang confused but curious.

Katara even told them of the strange dream, since she seriously doubted it was a dream at all.

"I mean, I don't see how I could have imagined being at the Fire Nation when I have never been there, and it was nothing like I would expect Fire Nation to look like", Katara concluded.

"Why didn't you tell us about this earlier?" Aang asked worriedly.

"Everyone has had a lot on their plate of late. I didn't want to add to it."

Truth be told, Katara wasn't entirely sure why she had not told them of her suspicions before now. Maybe she had been afraid of Zuko but had not wanted to admit she was. Katara wanted so bad to be a strong bender and to be able to defend herself.

"Yeah, sure. Because the guy we might be up against in the future having mysterious powers we didn't know he had is _definitely_ something we don't want to know about", Sokka mocked her reasoning.

"Seriously, though", he added. "Not trying to belittle your story or anything, but I kind of find it hard to believe that firebenders could read minds. I mean, first off, mindreading is impossible. Just think about it; we have fought the Fire Nation a lot and we have met a lot of people who have fought them even more. None of them, friends or foes, never gave us the heads-up that, by the way, watch out for firebenders, because they can read minds."

"A hundred years ago I had friends from all nations, even the Fire Nation, and none of them ever mentioned anything about mindreading", Aang pitched in.

"See?" Sokka said. "And this is _Fire Nation_ we are talking about. They aren't exactly known for subtlety. Their benders wear _skull masks_, for crying out loud. If they could do stuff like that, they would put it on their propaganda posters to show just how awesomely horrible they are. _Someone_ would have heard about it."

Katara was angry that the boys were teaming up against her, but she had to admit that they had a point. Even though news never traveled fast to the South Pole, a knowledge such as this one would have been the kind that was passed down from generation to generation.

"Well, I can't explain it", she responded, irritated. "All I know is that I saw what I saw, and _so did he._"

"Okay, then I guess this thing definitely warrants looking into", Sokka agreed. "I gotta say: somebody else's childhood memories from out of nowhere? Sounds creepy."

Katara made a face at her brother.

Although Sokka and Aang were mainly worried about the concept of mindreading, that was not the part Katara lost her sleep over. The truly weird part was that, as much as she hated Zuko, she could not help but feel a little curious about him, too.

There was more to the Prince than met the eye, for better or for worse.

They didn't have time to continue bickering, though, because the sun was setting.

ooo

Zuko was frustrated. He was still going nowhere with his investigation.

He had returned to the village of Kemi, since now that he knew Ursa had been given a map of the surrounding areas, the odds of her having stayed in the vicinity for a while had increased, if ever so slightly. Maybe someone would remember seeing a sad, beautiful Fire Nation woman here a few years ago.

Since the village had turned out to be a dead end only a few days earlier, this time Zuko had focused his efforts on the surrounding countryside.

The area was, on paper and in reality, very much part of the Earth Kingdom, so instead of taking their usual komodo-rhinos, Zuko and Uncle had rented a pair of ostrich-horses.

Zuko had ridden on an ostrich-horse only a few times in his life, but they did provide necessary camouflage against possible Earth Kingdom Army scouting parties they might run across.

They were both also wearing Earth Kingdom clothing for disguise. Uncle was wearing traditional Earth Kingdom green robes and a dark brown traveling cloak on top of everything.

Zuko's clothes were very non-descriptive. Lots of different dark colors, making it hard to place him in any particular nation.

Zuko had his sneaking outfit boots, belts, leather hand armors and Dao, but other than that, his clothes were nothing special. He was, however, wearing traditional scarfs around his neck and head, leaving his face visible but hiding his unusual hairstyle.

Now the sun was setting, and it was a several hour ride back to the ship, so they chose to seek shelter somewhere else instead, and continue their search tomorrow.

The small inn was located in a crossing of two relatively well-traveled roads. It seemed a bit shabby but safe enough for one night stay.

As Zuko and Iroh were walking from the stable to the main building, Zuko finally realized why the scenery looked so familiar.

"I have seen that mountain before", he said and pointed at the

closest peak, "I have seen it in a painting."

Uncle looked mildly puzzled. "Really? Because I am not certain I have."

"It was at the monastery. Master Kurita told me that most of the old Fire Nation shrines were located in Fire Nation, but some were in other nations as well. They were built to honor places that were believed to be spiritually connected to fire."

"I see where you are going with this. This area of Earth Kingdom is indeed volcanic, and known for its many refreshing hot springs. I would not mind visiting one of those", Uncle added and winked an eye at his nephew.

"And I wouldn't mind visiting that mountain", Zuko stated.

Uncle looked serious once more. "And what do you expect to find there, my nephew?

Zuko considered what to say. In all honesty, it was unlikely that the fact that there may once have been a Fire Nation shrine somewhere up there would make any difference to Ursa's chosen path.

Still, it was a huge coincidence that Zuko happened to run into a place he had once been told of. It felt almost, well, Zuko was not a very spiritual person, but if he had been, he might have called it destiny.

Eventually he answered: "At the rate this search has been going so far, praying couldn't hurt."

Uncle looked at him for a long time.

"I know, I know. A man needs his rest. But I am not tired and if I go right away, I will probably be back soon. And Uncle, I am taking this trip alone. You stay at the inn and wait for me."

ooo

Two years ago

"Separation is an illusion. All living things are connected. The true meaning of these words is very complicated and may take you years to understand. This is one of the most important lessons you will ever learn, so I hope you'll meditate on it as long as it takes for you to truly comprehend it."

Zuko nodded. He did not completely agree with his master on the utmost importance of this particular piece of ancient wisdom (personally, he could think of a hundred more important lessons), but after spending the last four months with the man, Zuko knew Master Kurita well enough to know he usually had a point.

So, Zuko was willing to at least consider that Kurita knew what he was talking about this time as well.

Also, sitting around contemplating something deep sounded like as good an excuse as any to take a little break from all the hiking.

They had risen before the sun and had been climbing up the mountainside all morning, so Zuko could really use a break, even though his pride would not let him ask for one.

From this high up on the mountain, the scenery was quite breathtaking. It was a clear, crispy morning with no clouds to limit the view.

While Zuko sat meditating, his legs crossed one over the other, he also focused on breathing deep Breaths of Fire in order to keep the chilly wind from piercing straight through him.

"Apprentice Zuko. Look around you and tell me what you see", Kurita ordered after they had sat in silence for a moment.

Zuko opened his eyes._ Okay, what do I see..._

"I can see the ocean from here. I can see the nearby mountaintops. I can see the valley, and the monastery in it", Zuko stated evenly.

"Can you really? I can see the sky and the ocean and the mountains, but I do not see a monastery", Kurita answered.

"It's over there", Zuko said and pointed down at the valley, wondering if the old master's vision was failing him.

"Are you sure? It looks like just another rock to me", Kurita said, sounding unconvinced.

"Well that's because Earth Kingdom fortresses are traditionally built from the same material, the same type of rock, that their surrounding areas are. It is cost-effective and helps to create a natural camouflage", Zuko clarified.

"That is very interesting, but I asked you to tell me what you see, not what you know", Kurita said, playing with words. "Look again, and tell me what you _see_."

Zuko looked again.

_What am I missing here? Or what is it that _is_ missing?_

"I see earth, air and water, but no fire."

Kurita nodded, so Zuko went on. "Looking from here, I would not think there is any Fire Nation presence here."

"So what makes you think there is?" Kurita inquired.

"Because I... know there is."

"And again with the knowing", Kurita sighed.

"What do you expect me to say?! You can't ask me to solely rely on what I see right now in front of me, and forget what I feel or already knew!" Zuko shot back, irritated.

For a moment, Kurita did not respond. They just sat in

silence.

Eventually, the old master continued: "You are right. It is unwise to rely solely on your sight. What you see is not always what is."

"However, it is often useful to let go of the things you think you know, so that you can see the situation from a new perspective. You might notice something you have missed before. Your earlier presumptions may even prove to be completely wrong."

"Okay, reevaluating the situation every now and then is a good idea. Got it. What's that to do with the whole 'separation is an illusion' thing?"

Kurita smiled a wistful smile at him. It was actually the first time Zuko had seen the man smile.

"That is a separate piece of wisdom. Then again, separation is an illusion, so in fact these things are connected."

Now the Master was just trying to make Zuko's head hurt.

"You were also right to presume there is fire here, even if you can't see it", Kurita added

"The sun", Zuko realized, suddenly feeling a bit blind himself. How could have he overlooked the source of his own power?

"That is the most obvious source of fire, yes, but it is far from the only one. You can find fire even in the unlikeliest of places. Even if it were night time or we were in a cave, even then there would be fire."

"Fire, just like all the other elements, is everywhere. All living things have an inner spark of life in them. The wind moves and redistributes fire's heat, and water and earth preserve that heat even when the sun has set. Under the soil, earth and fire are one in a never-ending dance", Kurita explained.

"All four elements are always present everywhere and in everything. It is only the ratios that vary. The elements need one another even if we humans are not always wise enough to see the connections that bind them, and us, together. One element cannot exist without the others, and for there to be balance in the world, the ratios must be in harmony."

Balance? Harmony? Master Kurita was beginning to sound like the Avatar.

"This is also what, in essence, enables the Power of Dragons. You can connect your thoughts with someone else's thoughts, because those thoughts are not separate from yours to begin with. Waterbending healing works much the same way. All things have a common heart that beats in us. People, rocks, waves, monasteries; things you think are separated by matter are in fact connected. By chi, by spirit, by essence."

"My teachers at the Fire Nation spoke nothing of such connections. They said fire was the superior element", Zuko pointed

out.

"Elements are at their strongest when working together. Alone, no one element is greater than the others."

"Treasonous words", Zuko commented.

Kurita smiled at him again. The expression still looked odd on his face.

"Well, hardly the most treasonous words they could catch me saying, should they dare to come and ask."

True.

ooo

The present

Iroh was taking a long, hot bath in his room at the inn. It was not quite a hot spring, but it still worked wonders on his tired body and spirit.

He wished Zuko had stayed here as well, but unfortunately his nephew had a tendency to get a bit obsessed over his missions.

Iroh was hopeful, however, that this one was close to its end.

He had been incredibly surprised to find out Ursa had not died the night she went missing, but it was still unlikely she was alive today. Most importantly, Iroh was not sure if Zuko was ready to face the ghosts of his past.

One way or another, this hike up the mountain was, hopefully, Zuko's way of getting some closure before admitting defeat and moving on with his life. Moving on had never been Zuko's strongest suit, but one could always hope.

The teenager would not find anything from an ancient Dragon Shrine, but sometimes the journey was what really mattered, not the destination. And this was by no standards one of his nephew's more foolhardy and dangerous quests. When Zuko returned, he would be exhausted but in one piece...

"Oh, dear Agni!" Iroh exclaimed out loud.

_We are a few days from _Winter Solstice_; the time when the veil between our world and the spirit realm is at its thinnest, and I have just allowed Zuko to go to a _Dragon Shrine_. Who knows how many angry spirits he may encounter there?!_

Iroh was dressed, packed and ready to go in less than five minutes.

ooo

It was close to midnight when Zuko finally reached what he presumed was the shrine. He left his ostrich-horse, a feisty black mare named Precious, tied to a small tree some distance from a platform that looked too smooth and symmetrical to be anything but manmade.

The shrine had been abandoned, probably thousands of years ago when the area had stabilized as part of Earth Kingdom, and all Fire Clans had moved out. Now the Dragon Shrine was little more than a pile of rocks, even though the hard mountain climate had made sure it was not completely overgrown.

Zuko felt... disappointed. He had somehow expected an answer to all his problems land on him once he got up there. Now, as he looked around, he couldn't help but to think that Uncle had been right.

A wasted trip.

It was actually pretty weird that he had been so sure he wanted to come up here in the first place. He was not good at asking for things and he did not count on his luck, so praying was not his cup of tea.

But tonight, he had come here almost as if summoned.

Although Zuko was starting to feel a little uneasy, there was one more thing he wanted to do now that he had gotten this far.

The Prince took a few incense sticks from his bag and placed them in a small bowl. He said a few traditional prayers and bowed to show respect to whatever spirits dwelled in this place before lighting the sticks with his firebending.

ooo

"Look, Sergeant. He is a firebender", one of Sergeant Rang's soldiers pointed out.

The leader of the Earth Kingdom Army scouting troop weighed his options, but since he was in charge of twenty experienced soldiers, there was no way the boy could prove to be a match.

The Sergeant nodded, which was a signal for his men to move ahead with their plan. It was time to put the ambush into action.

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A/N

Random Earth Kingdom soldiers harassing other travelers unprovoked is canon.

Emphasize in this fic isn't on romance but more on friendship and family ties. I'm not saying there isn't any romance at all, just letting you know that it won't be the main thing here.

9. The Dragon Shrine

9. The Dragon Shrine

I am not sure what is the name of the Spirit that this Shrine has been dedicated to, but whoever you are, I am in need of wisdom and guidance.

Zuko was down on his knees in front of what he presumed might once have been an altar or a statue.

He did not actually think praying would solve his problems, but Master Kurita had spoken highly of it, so Zuko had decided to give it a chance.

You have to try everything at least once.

The smell of the smoke rising from the incense reminded Zuko of the monastery he had spent six months at when he had been 14 years old, but Zuko would never go back to _them_ for help.

Instead, the Prince decided he should specify his wishes.

I need help to find my mother, Lady Ursa. If you can hear this, if you are somewhere out there, hear my request and give me an answer.

Suddenly, Zuko realized that he was not alone. Something was moving behind him, and that something was not a spirit.

ooo

Two years ago

Master Kurita waved his hands in a simple gesture, calling forth a flame and moving it to lit all the torches on the chamber's walls. Zuko had not been to this part of the monastery before, but that did not surprise him. The monastery was a maze with more rooms than any one person needed to visit.

Zuko immediately noticed that there was something different about this room. It was old; more like a cave than a room really.

Its walls and ceiling were uneven and rough. The walls were decorated with paintings and frescoes, and they covered every inch of the room.

The paintings were clearly old, the colors in them already a bit worn off. They portrayed different things: scenes, people, dragons, bending and sword katas.

"What are all these?" Zuko asked.

"These", Kurita said, and gestured towards a certain group of paintings, "are here to help us remember how to find old, almost forgotten Fire Nation shrines."

Zuko looked at the collection of frescoes

"I have seen this place before. It's in Earth Kingdom. How could there be a Fire Nation shrine in Earth Kingdom?"

Kurita looked at the fresco Zuko was pointing at. "Ah, the old Dragon Shrine. Yes, it is in Earth Kingdom, but no, that does not mean it could not be dedicated to Fire Nation spirits."

Zuko felt like asking what Kurita meant, but something told him he

would get to hear it anyway, so he looked at the painting more closely instead.

True enough, the master was not done talking. "People often think that the way things are now or have been for the past few hundred years is the way things have always been. Looking further back we will learn that very few things ever stay the same.

"Land we today see as either Earth Kingdom or Earth Kingdom territories conquered by Fire Nation has changed ownership many times in the history."

"So these lands used to belong to the Fire Nation?" Zuko guessed.

"In the old times, there were not just four nations dedicated to their representative elements, but there was rivalry as much within elements as there was between them. There were numerous clans and kingdoms that have long since been forgotten. The separation of elements is not as final as you may believe, and this is why different elements also have much to offer to one another. For example, our Order has the Air Nomads to thank for many of our techniques."

"The Air Nomads?" Zuko found that hard to picture. As far as he knew, the Air Nomads had been a weak and carefree people who did not have much to give to the world. At least the world seemed to be doing just fine without them in it.

"The Power of Dragons came from the original firebenders, dragons, but after the art was declared illegal, the Order of Shadows had to specialize in the arts of secrecy and subtlety as well. The monks living in Air Nomad monasteries very elusive and rarely shared their secrets, but they were not the only kind of airbenders that there was.

"When our Order left the Fire Nation archipelago and came to these lands, we soon learned that many wandering warrior monks had also settled around these mountains. They were rumored to be able to do supernatural things, and from this we deciphered that they were likely airbenders, for that bending has always been considered the most mysterious and elusive, and has often been mistaken for the work of spirits. The monks had retired here to detach themselves of all earthly things and to spend their time meditating on important lessons and honing their skills. After a while, the airbenders would let us train with them and they would teach some of their wisdom. So, it is the Air Nomads from whom we have adopted many of our teachings.

"We teach it is better to stay unnoticed and avoid conflict than to embrace a fight. We advise to fool the eye of a spectator, so that he is not sure what he sees, and only notices what you wish him to notice. Fire is about direct approach, whereas deception is a trait of air. I mean this as a compliment to the airbenders, of course.

"Even many of our fighting katas have been directly derived from the flowing way airbenders move from defense to offense and back. Similarly, there is a group of earthbenders in Ba Sing Se, who have derived many of their policies and interrogation techniques directly

from our teachings. Naturally, of course our organization to have been a band of Fire Nation assassins and to have died out centuries ago. I wonder if they even know they are taking influences from their opposite element as well as fire.

"As much as today's bending masters emphasize the unique qualities of their respective arts, and focus on what separates different bendings from one another, they are all remarkably alike. This is because all bendings can and have influenced one another greatly throughout history. Many masters actually believe that ideas and techniques taken from other elements are weaker than the 'pure' katas of a certain element. This is because different elements' core ideals are based on different philosophies. But masters who teach such things forget that we all have some amount of each of the four elements within us.

"This is why a balanced fighter needs to embrace all his sides, even the weaker ones. Especially the weaker ones. You should always keep your eyes and ears open to learn from the other elements. All of them."

Zuko considered that for a moment, and Kurita gave him time to do so before continuing: "Those, who think that any one element is better than the others, and think that one element alone should prevail, are great fools. And dangerous ones.

"Fire Lord Sozin was one of the greatest of all the fools. He had no more right to wipe out the Air Nomads than Fire Lord Azulon had to attack the dragons.

"And Fire Lord Ozai is no better than his predecessors in his visionless quest to conquer the world without knowing the first thing about what makes the world worth fighting for to begin with."

"What?! How dare you speak of my Father like that?! He is a wise and just ruler who is loved by his people!" Zuko clenched his fists. He felt like hitting something.

How can he say such things?! He knows nothing!

Kurita turned to look at his apprentice, looking calm albeit a bit irritated by Zuko's response.

"What did you expect to hear? You know how we feel about the Fire Nation's current policies here. Did you really think that we at the Order remembered the Fire Lord, especially any of the last three, in our morning prayers?"

"You are â€" wrong", is all Zuko managed to say through his anger before he stormed out of the room.

ooo

The present

An odd rumbling sound was all the warning Zuko got before he was under attack. Due to his years of travels in Earth Kingdom, it was all the warning he needed.

The Prince did not have time to decipher the exact origin of the attack, but when fighting earthbenders, keeping in move was never a bad idea.

The less you touch the ground the better.

Zuko leaped and rolled to turn to face his attacker. Three pillars of earth had shot up from the ground in the place where he had been kneeling down not two seconds ago. The power and precision of the assault made him suspect more than one bender was involved. Most likely one for each pillar.

_I _hope_ those were meant to hold me in place._

Zuko was very good at sneaking around, but he had noticed years ago that, as amazing as it was, people of earth were often as good at it as he was.

Especially when they were in their element, which was virtually always.

Zuko presumed bending the earth around their footsteps had something to do with it, but it still did not explain how a twenty or so guys had stayed under his radar this whole time.

_They cannot _all_ be benders._

Although it was night, the moon was nearly full, and lit the now crowded platform. Zuko couldn't quite make out the insignia on his opponents' uniforms, but he did not need extra help to know they were Earth Kingdom Army.

They were disciplined and moved as a group, but not in the way Fire Nation Army would have. If this had been a Fire Nation ambush, the troops would have surrounded the target entirely, forming an evenly spaced circle around him.

These attackers had left some of their men out of the circle, so it appeared having potential backup, was more important to them than insuring the line had no holes to break through.

Not just any guys, Zuko realized. _By the look of their weapons, or the lack of them, they chose to leave some of their _benders_ behind._

Zuko had heard earthbenders preferred to fight from behind a wall. Were the troops now creating the benders a human wall to fight behind from?

Zuko unsheathed his Dao. He would need every trick in his arsenal to get out of this situation in one piece. As much as he did not like to admit it, even that might not be enough if these guys knew at all what they were doing.

And from the neat way they held their ambush, I am going to have to presume they do. Damn.

ooo

The kid must have eyes on the back of his head! Private Kwan

thought.

Most _earthbenders_ he knew would not have been able to see an attack as subtle as that coming, let alone dodge it in time.

Maybe he just got freakishly lucky or something.

Kwan moved in formation with the rest of his squad. He was the youngest of the team but he would be damned if he were the weakest.

Sergeant Rang approached the Fire Nation boy. "You are outnumbered one to twenty. You cannot win. You should drop your weapons and surrender. Right now!"

Under Rang's usual serious and demanding tone, there was a hint of laughter and mockery.

The teenager with the swords, however, appeared unimpressed. If he was afraid, he sure did not let it show.

Needless to say, the boy did not drop his swords.

Kwan had a bad feeling about this. He had heard that Fire Nation soldiers might choose to fight even when facing impossible odds, but somehow this kid did not seem like the madly desperate type...

Which is nonsense, of course. He has nothing on us, Kwan had to remind himself.

"Last chance, boy", Rang said.

"I am not worried", the boy suddenly spoke up, his tone going for nonchalant. "_I'm_ not the one who just desecrated an ancient shrine dedicated to a very vengeful spirit. The Blue Spirit. Maybe you have heard of him. He has been pretty active of late."

"You really take us for fools?!" Rang sounded more annoyed than anything. "Do you think you can scare us off with ghost stories?!"

Kwan wished he could share his commanding officer's certainty, but after all the stories he had heard, the mere mentioning of the Blue Spirit made him a bit restless.

The Private took glanced around himself, just to be on the safe side. He did not like the amount of shadows the nearby cliffs and trees created.

_Anything could be lurking in any one of them. _

Kwan returned his attention to the boy just in time.

The most experienced earthbender on the team had chosen this to be the right moment to make his move, and tried to tackle the firebender to the ground with a slide of rocks.

Kwan could barely believe his eyes when the young man held his ground, blocking most of the rocks with nothing but his swords. The

other soldiers were moving ahead as well, but not fast enough.

_How was anyone supposed to guess that this kid would avoid _two_ sure take-downs in a row?_

A spear man took a sweep at the boy, who in turn grabbed the spear and used it as leverage to thrust the man aside. Without stopping, the boy continued with a firekick, making several people closing in on him reconsider.

Kwan had fought both, sword fighters and firebenders before, but no one like this boy.

He moved so... effortlessly. The gracefulness of his movements reminded Kwan more of dancing than fighting.

He does not even look like he is giving this his all!

ooo

Zuko was giving the fight his all. There were so many attackers on him that he had to move purely on instinct to keep ahead of them all, but after a long day of traveling, he was not sure how long he could keep up this intensity.

Normally, Zuko would have tried to run for cover, but another thing you needed to know about skillful earthbenders was that they were great trackers. He could not hide behind earth, and there was little else here big enough to hide behind.

The bright moonlight did not help, either.

Zuko was a fast runner, but at this point, turning his back and running was about as good an idea as trying to outrun a full squad of Yu Yan.

Especially the earthbenders lurking a little distance from the heat of the battle were _literally_ just waiting for him to make a mistake and give them an opening.

That is what earthbenders do. They wait for their turn, and if you give them one, they will crush you with a single blow.

ooo

Kwan was terrified. He was now sure he had seen something move in the darkness around them. Something big. He had to warn the others.

"Sir! There.. there is something out there!"

Sergeant Rang looked furious. "Private Kwan, another word of this superstitious nonsense and I will have you punished and...!"

The Sergeant's last words were drowned out by a sudden, eerie whooshing sound coming from somewhere close by.

Everyone stopped fighting and were now listening intently. The sound ended as abruptly as it had began, leaving an ominous quiet around the platform.

ooo

Two years ago

Zuko rushed into Master Kurita's quarters without knocking. The old man was meditating cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed. Zuko did not wait to be acknowledged.

"I am leaving."

"I know", Kurita said without opening his eyes or showing any interest.

"You cannot stop me."

"Whatever made you think I would?"

"Do not play games. You don't think I should leave, and you would stop me if you could. We both know as much."

Master Kurita sighed, opened his eyes and broke his meditation session. "Yes and no. You are right. I do not think you should leave, but no, I am not going to stop you from leaving. I could, but I won't."

Zuko turned to leave but Master Kurita went on: "Leaving does not mean you would no longer be a member of the Order of Shadows. Once you have been taught our ways, they will stay with you forever. Eyes once opened, cannot be simply..."

"I want nothing more to do with you."

"And still, you will not tell anyone of us and our methods, and as long as you do not, you are one of us."

Zuko turned to look at his old master. The Prince asked through gritted teeth: "Why? If you hate me and my family so much, why did you take me on as an apprentice? Was this all some cruel joke to you? You must have known how this would end."

"I do not hate you, and any grudge I might hold against your family does not include you."

"Well it should. Because I am a part of my family."

Kurita looked sad as he shook his head: "No, you are not. I have known that since the first time I looked into you. You may be able to lie to others, you may even be able to lie to yourself, but you cannot lie to me.

"I have seen what Ozai did to you, to his own son, and a betrayal of that magnitude can never be taken back. That is why I took you on as my student. Because I knew you would never again be loyal to the man you call father."

Zuko would hear no more of this. He threw all the anger in his veins into a massive firefist. Kurita, having perhaps anticipated Zuko's move, was on his feet and dodged the assault.

Before Zuko had time to attack again, Kurita changed from defense to offense and took Zuko down with a single, well-placed sweep of his arm.

"Mizzra would be extremely disappointed that you left your flank wide open like that. Never let your emotions get the best of you."

And just like that, Kurita left the room.

Zuko left soon as well. Upon arriving back at his ship, he told Uncle it was time they continued the hunt for the Avatar. The monastery had nothing more to give to him.

ooo

The present

The moment was nothing if not tense. However, no matter what the noise had been, Zuko would be in trouble if it did not come back before one of the earthbenders realized that now was an excellent time to strike.

Zuko did not like not knowing what was out there, but he had no choice but to stay alert for the threat right in front of him.

The weirdest part was that the noise had sounded faintly familiar. _Where have I heard that before?_

Almost as if requested, the sound began again, and even louder this time. It seemed to be coming from all around them.

Suddenly Zuko knew where he had heard it before.

After the Avatar had thrown him into the Arctic Ocean during their first fight, Zuko had nearly been taken over by panick under water. There, he had heard something. Which was ridiculous, because he did not remember hearing anything at the time, but now that he heard the mystery sound, the Prince was definitely reminded of that moment.

The sound reminded Zuko of the way the warmth of the Sun had called for him. It reminded him of safety.

Which was even weirder.

The Sun does not make sounds. The Sun does not breathe.

Breathing? It would certainly explain the rhythm. Whatever was out there was huge, but if it was breathing, it was something alive.

Before Zuko had time to plan any further, the entire clearing around them was filled with blinding light. High flames rose from all around them, seemingly out of nothing, and they revealed something even more worrisome than Zuko had suspected.

A gigantic dragon was curled around the entire platform, breathing a ring of fire to block their escape.

The dragon uncurled and rose to air. It was so big that each of its movement caused a small wind. The dragon was no longer breathing fire, but the clearing remained well-lit because more and more of the undergrowth caught flame.

The soldiers looked petrified, but they did not try to flee. Either they figured they would stand a better chance as a group or they were simply too scared to move.

Zuko was shocked, too, but also mesmerized by the effortless way the magnificent creature moved.

A dragon! I cannot believe I found a dragon! In Earth Kingdom of all the places. Uncle is never going to believe this.

Not that Zuko would probably live to tell the tale.

"You two, watch out for the monster! Earthbenders, create a way out. The rest of you, as soon as the way is clear, retreat back to your ostrich-horses!" The leader of the group ordered.

Zuko was not sure what good keeping watch would do if the dragon chose to swallow them whole, but the circling beast made no move to stop the soldiers from escaping.

Zuko considered his own options.

The earthbenders had lifted what little sand there was to put out some of the flames, creating a way to escape. Zuko could try to go after the running men, but somehow, he was not too enthusiastic about that option.

Sifu Mizzra had once told him that he should treat powerful firebenders like he would treat a dragon: show them respect to let them know you do not want a fight, but do not show too much submission or they might consider you easy prey.

So Zuko stood his ground.

For a moment, the only sounds around the platform were the crackles of the now smoldering flames and the small whooshing caused by the flying creature. Zuko might have mistook the sound for wind if it were not for the weight and power of the creature looming above him.

One moment, the dragon was circling above Zuko, but in a blink of an eye, it had landed and was directly in front of him, its jaws a few meters from the teenager.

Dragons cannot move like that! Nothing can!

Zuko was startled before he realized that what he was actually looking at was not a dragon.

_Nothing from _this world _can move like that. But it is not from this world. It's a dragon _spirit._

Whether that was for better or for worse, Zuko couldn't tell.

For a moment that felt like eternity, the spirit gazed at Zuko with

its unblinking eyes. All Zuko could do was try to return the gaze. He was pretty sure that the moment he moved an inch the dragon would burn him. Or swallow him whole.

Zuko was not exactly sure if dragon spirits, which he had only heard of in legends, could do that, but the fire earlier had been real enough.

The dragon's whisker, a long, wide tentacle coming out of one side of its snout, rose up and began to reach for Zuko. The whisker stopped a few inches from him.

It took Zuko a while to figure out the gesture.

You want to interrogate me, but you also want me to meet you half way.

Zuko took a deep breath, lifted his hand and touched the whisker.

A flood of images and sensations filled Zuko's mind, but it was not as confusing or even as difficult as using the Power of Dragons usually was. Despite the continuous sharing of information, it wasn't hard for Zuko to tell his own memories apart from the alien one's.

I guess dragons did enjoy this, after all.

The dragon spirit, Tuli, was also at ease, and it turned out that it was in fact a she.

Zuko wondered briefly if this what what using of Power of Dragons was like for real masters. The sensation of the contact was nothing like having a more experienced firebender breach your mind, though. This was more like both participants were swimming in the same pond; constantly connected but keeping a respectful distance, and only showing the other what they wished to show.

The 'conversation' had a rhythm, a pulse, like all fire did. It felt... natural.

The female dragon cut straight to the chase: '_You have summoned me and here I am.'_

_'I've...' _Zuko tried to quickly remember what he had exactly asked for in his prayer. Oh yes, answers.

Zuko communicated to the best of his ability: '_Great Dragon Spirit Tuli, with all due respect I, Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, ask for your help. I ask you to tell me where Lady Ursa is.'_

The dragon did not look pleased._ 'This Shrine was built in my honor over three thousand years ago, but it has been a long time since anyone has remembered me with prayers or sacrifices. This Shrine became obsolete long before the days of Azulon, the dragon slayer. And yet here you stand, Human Child, asking for my help. What made you think you would find help here?'

Zuko felt irritated by the dragon's belittling tone, but he had enough sense to stay polite. '_I came here... because I felt like I should... You! You summoned me here!'

The dragon's face was unreadable, but eventually she answered: '_No, I did not.'_

'I felt a pull towards this forgotten sanctuary. If it wasn't you, then who?'

_'It was you, Human Child. You have summoned us _both_ here. I am a forgotten spirit. I do not have the power to manifest in the realm of the living on my own. But with the Solstice so near and a powerful sage calling for me, for the first time in centuries, I had enough power to make my mark on the human world. I am grateful to you for calling me here and for giving me a chance to be heard.'_

Zuko did not understand, so the spirit continued: '_The Fire Lord has always had a special connection to Fire Nation spirits, and, as his son, so do you.'_

_'But', _Zuko still needed clarification, 'you said I summoned us both here, but I didn't.'_

Tuli looked almost bemused. 'Young, lonely dragons are often drawn to seek out the company of older ones, especially when they are in need of help.'

Zuko felt unsure whether to trust the spirit or not. Uncle had never widely discussed his trip to the Spirit Realm, but he had mentioned that spirits usually had plans of their own. They had hidden agendas, and were not benevolent or helpful by standard.

Though, Tuli had said she felt grateful to him, so Zuko decided to trust her for the time being.

_'But I am not a dragon', Zuko pointed out, still dubious, '_and nor are you.'

The dragon spirit looked amused. '_Those are differences you know in your thoughts, but not in your heart.'

Suddenly, the dragon was right next to Zuko, close enough to touch his chest with her whisker.

_'You are a dragon at heart, and when you listen to your heart, it will lead you to things you never knew you needed', _Tuli explained.

'If you don't believe me, see for yourself. See what dragons are like.'

Tuli showed Zuko memories of dragons from the three thousand years she had been watching Earth. She showed him images of dragons playing, fighting and hunting. Tuli showed him dragons teaching firebending to humans, and also glimpses of dragons being slain during Azulon's era, and Zuko could not help but feel ashamed.

Zuko felt more ashamed than he had ever felt for being of the royal line. He had felt sorry for the Air Nomads, but it was an entirely different thing to experience a genocide this intimately, even if ever so briefly.

_ 'Fear not, Little Dragon. You are not your grandfather. I would not have come here to help you if you were.' _

Earlier, this would have made Zuko dubious, because in folklore, asking help from an angry spirit seemed to often have serious consequences. However, after seeing into the mighty dragon's mind, Zuko felt like he should trust her. She was angry at those who had hurt her kind, but that was because she cared. She was sad, not vengeful.

_ 'So you will help me? But why?' _

_ 'Because we have more in common than you realize, Little Dragon. We are both children of Agni, and we have both been hurt and hunted down by our own kin.' _

_ 'You are stubborn, feisty and fight for what you believe in, like a true dragon should. We are in fact so alike I wonder if your spirit would not have reincarnated as a _human_ firebender but as a dragon if dragons were not so few in numbers these days.' _

Zuko was mildly intimidated by the concept, but not enough to lose sight of the main point. '_So you will help me? You'll help me find my mother?' _

Tuli sighed.

_ 'What is that supposed to mean? Will you help me or not?' _ Zuko asked again.

Tuli answered: '_I wish to help you, but I fear that if I give you what you ask for, I will hurt you instead. You are so young, so fragile and so alone.' _

The dragon shook her head with disapproval. '_A dragon nestling has many defenses that you do not; thick skin, sharp claws and teeth, the ability to fly. And still, a dragon parent would _never_ leave her child alone to face the dangers of the world. The parent would rather die.' _

Zuko's face paled. He had to prove Tuli's implications wrong. '_My mother did not abandon me!' _

_ 'Then why is she not here with you? Why do you not know where she is?' _

Zuko bit his lip. '_I... She did not have a choice. And she could be in trouble. I have to find her. I have to make sure she is okay.' _

_ 'I do not question _your_ loyalty, nestling.' _The dragon looked almost kind despite her scary appearance.

Tuli's white, long body moved slowly. For the first time, Zuko noticed the countless scars covering her sides. Tuli was a fighter, just like he was.

Still, Zuko had to find his answers. '_For the last time: will you help me?' _

For a long moment, the dragon spirit said nothing, but eventually she nodded.

'I will give you the information you seek. But I must warn you: if you follow your heart on everything, it may find more than it can handle, and then not even thick skin or sharp claws could protect your heart from breaking.'

'I'll take my chances.'

'If you do end up hurt, I could help you carry the burden. I owe you, after all.'

_'I did not think spirits cared that much, to be honest', _Zuko stated earnestly.

'Most do not care at all. I _don't always care, but you are kin, and you have been left to carry all the responsibility alone too often. You need safety and peace. You need time for your wounds to heal. These things I cannot give you, but protection, perhaps. Yes, you must!'_

'Must what?'

'Let me protect you.'

_'I don't need protection', _Zuko stated. It was almost a knee-jerk reaction for him by now.

'Yes, you do. You are at war with yourself, and when that war rages at its worst, you are at your most fragile. Not even your determination can protect you then.'

Zuko tried to argue but Tuli was not finished: ' _When you are not sure what you should do, whose side you should be on, or even who you are supposed to be, you're very vulnerable. I cannot come to your aid. I am not that powerful a spirit. But I can teach you to _protect yourself_ if you let me. All I ask is that if you do not find your family, be part of mine.'_

Zuko was shocked, but Tuli seemed perfectly serious. ' _We have both been alone and forgotten for too long. Perhaps together we can keep what little remains of my kind alive.'_

Zuko felt unsure. He did not like the way she had implied his family might not be found...

'I have a family, even if I do not find my mother. I have Uncle. And when I capture the Avatar, my father will welcome me home.'

Tuli nodded. ' _Very well. But should you change your mind, I am still in your debt, and I will come for you should you need me.'_

Zuko knew there was something Tuli was leaving unsaid, but he also knew asking would not help. The dragon had said all she intended, and now it was up to Zuko to decide whether to accept the terms or not. Since he was not expected to sign a detailed or even a very binding contract, and agreeing to cooperate might lead him to Ursa, the decision was not a hard one.

()()()

****A/N****

In real world, different martial arts have different philosophies and moves, but many of them share common ancestry, and have much in common. Nothing is born in a vacuum without influences from older styles and arts. That is why I thought it was only logical that different bendings took influences from the same sources and one another in the Avatar world as well.

Earthbending in the show is based on more than one martial art from our world. Not all benders of the same element share the same fighting style. We see this a lot in the show, so I figured it meant that in the history of the Avatar world, there were probably many eras when people bending the same element were not on the same side.

And there really were traveling Chinese warrior monks in Ancient Japan, and ninjutsu is thought to be based at least partially on their teachings. The monks were rumored to have magical powers such as the ability to endure great pain, lift heavy objects and even levitate. Remind you of anyone?

10. Stuff of Legends

****10. Stuff of Legends****

Iroh was incredibly worried. While moving up the little mountain path that led to the Shrine he had seen a hint of light behind the treetops. His ostrich-horse. Haystack, had become restless. These were all signs that something was out of place.

Iroh hurried his mount to go faster but the animal refused to co-operate, so he decided to go the rest of the way on foot.

Iroh was soon out of breath, but his determination kept him going.

Should do more exercise, he made a mental note.

Suddenly Iroh could here sounds of movement ahead of him. To be on the safe side, he left the path for a moment to hide in a shadow of a crooked tree.

Coming down the path was a group of maybe twenty or so Earth Kingdom soldiers riding on ostrich-horses. They seemed to be in a great hurry to be elsewhere, none of them stopping to look around. They did not see Iroh behind the tree.

In fact, they probably wouldn't have noticed me even if I'd have been standing in the middle of the road, such is their distress. They might have just ran over me. I do wonder what is the reason to such a rush?

The last of the soldiers came maybe a hundred meters behind the rest. His ostrich-horse was giving him a hard time.

As much as Iroh was in a hurry, it was wise to gather intel on what

he was about to walk into.

Iroh lifted a fallen branch from the ground and embraced himself. The rest of the troops were already out of sight but quite possibly not out of hearing range.

Still, something told Iroh that the odds of the troops turning back to come to their fellow soldier's aid were on Uncle's side.

When the soldier was passing him, Iroh jumped from the shadows and knocked the man down from his ostrich-horse with the branch.

The man, a boy, really, made a terrified squeak. His ostrich-horse, crazed by fear, ran away.

The boy Iroh had knocked down didn't even attempt to get up and fight him. He just stayed on the ground, covering his face with his hands and mumbling something that sounded like 'don't eat my soul'.

Iroh decided to try to comfort the man so as to get sensible answers out of him.

"Don't worry, son, I'm not going to hurt you. Everything is alright", he said as calmly and friendly as he could, and that was pretty calm and friendly.

Slowly, the soldier caught on to Iroh's tone and lowered his hands.

"I'm Iroh" Uncle said and smiled at the man, "What's your name?"

"K... Kwan."

"It's nice to meet you, Kwan. I'm sorry that I knocked you down from your ostrich-horse, but I needed to exchange a word with you. You see, I'm looking for my nephew, who I believe could be in trouble, and I was wondering if you'd seen him. He'd be about your height with dark clothing."

Looking at the boy's terrified eyes, Uncle was not entirely convinced the poor soldier understood his words. Eventually, the man did manage to stammer out: "I... you... I..."

Suddenly he grabbed Iroh's hand and said: "NO! You can't go there! There's a monster there! You go there and it'll eat you!"

"It's alright, no one's going to hurt you now", Iroh continued to calm the nerve-wrecked soldier, "Could you tell me what type of a monster you are exactly referring to?"

"A... a dragon", the man stammered, his voice shaky.

Oh no, Uncle thought to himself. It sounded like trouble had already found his nephew.

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When Iroh finally arrived at the Shrine, he saw his nephew sitting in the middle of it, baffled but in a good condition. Iroh quickly

praised all the deities he could think of for having watched over Zuko, and hurried over to him.

"Nephew! Nephew! Are you alright?" Uncle asked while kneeling next to him to better inspect his possible injuries.

Zuko startled as Uncle laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. He looked at Uncle, looking surprised to see him there.

"I'm... I'm fine. What are you doing here?" Zuko answered.

Uncle hugged his nephew.

"I really am fine, Uncle", Zuko said, undoubtedly embarrassed for having caused such worry.

"I can see you are", Uncle replied, letting go of Zuko so he could once again look at his face, "What happened here?"

"I..." Zuko seemed to be having trouble finding the right words. "I met a spirit. A Dragon Spirit."

Seeing his uncle's worried face Zuko quickly added: "But it's okay. It didn't hurt me. I summoned it to help me and it was grateful and it saved me from the soldiers and it showed me where to find Mother."

Uncle tried to process all the information he'd just been given: "Wait a second: you were under attack even before the spirit manifested?"

Zuko looked embarrassed, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand: "Well, I'm sure I could've handled it... There weren't that many of them..."

"Zuko, I counted twenty soldiers leaving this place."

Zuko grimaced for a moment, but then his face settled for a serious expression and he just nodded.

"But it's alright now", he added, "And didn't you hear what I just said? I know where to look for my mother next."

Uncle took a breath to calm himself.

He knew he was being unnecessarily hard on his nephew. There was no way Zuko could have anticipated getting into this much trouble and therefore it really wasn't his nephew's fault that he'd been assaulted by both the Earth Kingdom Army and a Dragon Spirit.

It was Iroh who should have anticipated the possible dangers. He was older and more experienced on spiritual matters. He was responsible for Zuko.

"The spirit helped you?" Iroh asked, trying not to sound accusing.

"She said she owed me because I had remembered her and given her a chance to make a difference in the world", Zuko said seriously.

Iroh nodded slowly.

He tried to think what all he knew of dragon spirits and found his knowledge level lacking. Uncle though he had read somewhere that dragon spirits weren't malevolent unless threatened or insulted, but he was afraid just Zuko's ancestry could be an insult to any number of spirits...

Then again Zuko seemed to be fine. Maybe Iroh was just getting all worked up over nothing.

There was something in Zuko's eyes Iroh couldn't quite put his finger on, but once again he also knew he couldn't force answers out of Zuko.

"So the Spirit asked for nothing in return for its help?" Iroh asked.

"She said we were kin", Zuko answered, "She said she wanted to help me, and our minds were connected, so I think she was telling the truth."

Uncle nodded again, even though he was still far from comfortable with the idea of Zuko meeting a Dragon Spirit.

First things first, now they needed to get back to the ship and to safety before anything else unfortunate would find his nephew.

Uncle helped Zuko up.

Fortunately, Zuko had tied his ostrich-horse well and it was still waiting for them some distance from the Shrine. They began their journey downhill and towards the shore.

ooo

36 hours later

Sokka was not having a good day, but he tried not to complain too much. He knew no one had had it easy the past few days, though having been kidnapped by a spirit himself, Sokka was pretty sure he had had it the worst.

Sokka had also only a few hours ago almost fallen to his death when they'd been running a Fire Nation blockade and the damn firebenders had been bombarding them.

All this because Aang just had to talk to a dead firebender (which wasn't creepy at all).

Now they were not only in the Fire Nation but in secret lava tunnels hiding from a bunch of old but scary Fire Sages.

The one thing that could have completed the experience was if Prince Zuko had jumped from behind a pillar and taken another shot at capturing Aang.

Speaking of which, now wasn't a half bad time to make some inquiries.

"So, Fire Sage guy..." Sokka began.

"Just call me Shyu", the surprisingly helpful Fire Sage guy said.

"Right. So you are a pretty well-informed man on Fire Nation stuff, right?"

"Well, yes. I mean, since I live on this remote island I may not have the latest updates, nor do I know military secrets, but if there is something you need to know about the Fire Nation history or culture, I'd be honored to help the Avatar and his companions."

The Fire Sage smiled at him encouragingly, before continuing to mind his steps as they were walking up a steep tunnel.

"So, do firebenders know how to read minds?"

The question stopped them all dead in their tracks. Katara and Aang, too, turned to look expectantly at Shyu.

The older man tried to compose himself, the question clearly having caught him off guard.

"Well, my initial answer would be 'no', but..." Shyu began, lost in thought.

"But what?" Katara asked.

"I am a firebender, and I know many firebenders, and I have never met or heard of a bender who could do anything like mindreading."

"Still", the man added hesitantly, "there is an old legend, a myth, really, that goes more or less: 'as dragons could see into people's hearts, so were the children of fire blessed with a gift to see into another man's past. A literal interpretation of that could be that it is possible for firebenders to have an ability to, well, see into people's memories.'"

"But it's an old tale, and probably just a metaphor. There is lot of other weird stuff mentioned in the same tale, so it is all most likely just nonsense", Shyu concluded.

If he was expecting to see relieved smiles on the children's faces, he was certainly proven wrong.

"Wait a second", Aang said, "Did you say dragons can see into people's memories? Can they also show you memories? Because just the other day I met Roku's dragon and he could show me images of things with this weird tentacle thing. I figured it was just a Spirit World thing, 'cause I could do something similar with Hei Bai, but I guess it could have been a firebending thing..."

"You have met Fang, Roku's dragon companion? Oh my", Shyu seemed to be almost as disturbed by the thought of an old dead dragon showing up as Sokka had been when Aang had told him and Katara about his trip to the Spirit World.

"Aang, I think you might be onto something", Sokka allowed, and

continued to Shyu: "So, anyways, what would you say if we told you that we've learned from a sort of reliable source that firebenders can read minds?"

Katara elbowed Sokka at the words "sort of".

Shyu looked baffled both, by Sokka's words and by the elbowing.

He said: "If it's a secret, you don't have to tell me your source. I understand."

"Oh no, it's not that", Katara amended quickly, "I was just, um, letting my brother know how I feel about him being a condescending idiot."

Shyu seemed to still be at a loss, so Katara continued: "I mean, it's not a big secret that we think Zuko can read minds."

The Fire Sage's face dropped. "Zuko? You don't by any change mean the banished Prince Zuko?"

The kids looked at one another, before Sokka answered: "Yeah, probably the same guy. You met him?"

"Well, no. I've seen him from a distance once, but he was just a child then. The Fire Sages have dealings with the royal family regularly, but the Prince was banished at such a young age..."

"We should keep walking while we talk", Aang cut in, surprising Sokka greatly. It was unlike of the carefree airbender to worry over such things as making it to a meeting in time. That was usually Sokka's or Katara's job.

"Of course", Shyu agreed, and gestured, "This way."

"I have to ask", Shyu went on, "Do you really believe the gift of mindreading is possible and that Prince Zuko, Fire Lord Ozai's first born, can do it?"

"Well, we're not sure..." Sokka began, but Katara cut in: "Yes, we are. He used his 'gift' on me when we first met and he admitted as much the second time."

"You've met the young prince more than once?" Shyu asked, his brows furrowed, but then he face-palmed himself and continued: "Oh, how silly of me. I'm sure you would have."

"The terms of his banishment do, after all, dictate that he can only redeem himself by capturing the Avatar. Though you should be quite safe from him here, since he is not allowed to return to Fire Nation under any circumstances before he has in fact captured you."

Sokka was going to add something to his sister's story, but he lost his train of thought when thinking of what Shyu had just said.

Sokka said: "Really? Well, I guess that explains why he's followed us all the way from the South Pole..."

"This is revolutionary", Shyu suddenly exclaimed, "If what you say is

true, it will change the way we understand our history and our element."

"That's all very well and nice, but what can we do to defend ourselves from mindreading?" Katara insisted to know.

Once again, Shyu seemed clueless: "I... wouldn't know."

"You said you had read something on the subject", Sokka encouraged.

"You mean the Tales of Shan Li?"

"Yeah. What else does it say in them?"

Shyu considered that for a moment before answering: "Well, I've never taken those writings very seriously, but in this context..."

"The Tales tells of four men, one of whom is a firebender, one an earthbender, one a waterbender and one an airbender. It describes that each of the benders has a different special talent. They each try in turn to explain their talents to the others."

"They basically compete on whose element allows them to do most with it. The teaching of the story is that no element is greater than the others. Because that is at odds with Fire Nation's current writing of history, the story is no longer widely taught."

"What does it say about these special powers each element has? If the others powers are real, too, maybe we could use them to counterattack one another's effects?" Sokka speculated, his mind already ahead of him.

"Well, the story is written as a poem so it isn't incredibly accurate. What it basically says is that the firebender has a talent to understand people's pasts, the earthbender can see things clearer than the others, the waterbender has, naturally, the gift to mend the wounded, and the airbender is a master of deception."

"When you say the waterbender can naturally mend the wounded, what do you mean?" Katara asked, of course most interested in her own element.

"Well, it is no secret that some waterbenders have the power to heal the injured", Shyu explained.

"They can?" Katara exclaimed, completely at awe, "Did you hear that, Aang? When we get to the Northern Water Tribe, maybe they'll teach us that, too."

She was exuberant, and Sokka couldn't blame her. Healing did sound like a really useful talent.

Still, they didn't have time to waste on Katara dreaming of the future. Sokka tried to steer the conversation back to the topic: "What about the other talents? Have you heard that there were real life equivalents to them?"

"Not of mindreading, and there aren't many unbiased writings on the airbenders left, but I have heard wild stories of earthbenders having

an almost sixth sense of sorts. One hears earthbenders know where their enemies are without looking and can always find the people they're tracking and never lose their sense of direction... I'm not sure if that counts for a super power, but... well, who knows? Maybe there is more to it."

"But why are airbenders masters of deception?" Aang asked, wide-eyed, "We are a kind people and we don't mean to deceive anyone."

"Well, in the story the airbender is described to vanish before the other benders' eyes", Shyu contemplated, "Presuming earth is about seeing clearly, maybe its opposite element would have the opposite effect of blurring one's vision..."

But that was all the speculation they had time to do before they arrived at the end of a staircase. It led to a hall and to a wide double-door with five carved dragon heads in it.

The door was locked.

Figures.

ooo

Zuko was standing at the deck of his ship. He knew he should have been happy. The Dragon Spirit had as good as confirmed that his mother was alive.

She was located in a little Earth Kingdom village inland in the Kingdom, not too far from where they would soon dock.

She's alive.

That was good news. Still Zuko felt anxious.

If she's alright, why hasn't she tried to contact me?

It was silly and unfair of Zuko to ask such things. His mother loved him with all her heart and she would've been there for Zuko if she could've.

Therefore there was undoubtedly a good reason why she had not tried to reach him. Most likely it was because she couldn't reach him because she was in trouble or held captive.

When Zuko had been a child, he had sometimes fantasized about his mother suddenly returning or how he himself would rescue her from bad people of varying sorts. Now the possibility of having to fight bad people seemed to have become quite real.

Then again, maybe Ursa was alright and free but unable to contact Zuko because she didn't know he, too, was in Earth Kingdom.

No matter what the reason, Zuko would find his mother soon enough, and then all his questions would be answered.

Someone was approaching Zuko from behind, and by the way he walked, Zuko guessed it was Lieutenant Jee.

After spending three years on a ship with the same people, you didn't

need to be a master ninja to recognize people by footsteps.

"Sir", Lieutenant Jee addressed Zuko, "We will arrive at the port of Hon in ten minutes."

Zuko nodded, but as the Lieutenant was about to leave, Zuko addressed him: "Lieutenant Jee. My uncle and I will continue the searching. Tell the men to prepare the ostrich-horses we bought."

"Very well", Jee answered, and added to make sure he'd understood: "Going to go search for the Avatar, sir?"

"Yes", Zuko lied, "We'll be gone at least two days so you can hand out personal leaves to the crew, according to your judgment."

It seemed only fair since Zuko himself was actually going out on a more _personal_ mission.

Zuko had agreed with Uncle that it was unnecessary for the crew to know who they were looking for this time. Before they themselves had more information on the situation, on the record, they were still looking for the Avatar.

Lieutenant Jee was once again about to leave when Zuko added: "And Lieutenant, there is something I'd like you to tell the crew."

Zuko took a deep breath. He knew he didn't have to say this, but somehow he felt like getting some closure with the crew before going on his next journey. It was time to let them off the hook and maybe even apologize for his own behavior,

"Please tell them that I am pleased with their recent performances and wish them to keep working admirably."

"Pleased?" Lieutenant Jee was openly surprised.

"Yes. Very pleased", Zuko confirmed, wondering if the real message was getting through. "Dismissed."

Lieutenant Jee bowed and left, still looking stunned. Zuko felt a bit guilty for not giving positive feedback more often.

Surely they know I appreciate their contribution to my quest, don't they?

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Zhao was pleased with himself.

He had just captured the Avatar's Water Tribe allies and a Fire Nation traitor and it was literally a matter of minutes before he'd get his hands on the Air Nomad as well.

The only thing that could've completed the experience was if the banished prince was foolish enough to show up. Then Zhao could arrest him as well and finally get even for what had happened at Halti village. For all of it.

_Not that I'd let him get away with it, one way or another. I don't yet have proof he broke any laws in hiding the Avatar from me and

ruining my investigation, but I'll be sure to find something to hang over his head..._

The Avatar was taking his time, so Zhao felt it was safe enough to turn his attention elsewhere for the time being.

I'm sure we'll notice when the four-times-the-size-of-a-man doors move so much as an inch.

Zhao turned to address the head Fire Sage: "Have you ever heard of an instance where a bender was able to... gather information unusually effectively?"

Since the sages looked clueless Zhao decided he had to specify: "Using his bending, that is."

"Do you mean threatening...?" the head of the sages tried.

"No. I mean is it possible for a firebender to...extend their ability to another person's mind?"

The sages still looked baffled but from the corner of his eye Zhao noticed the Water Tribe barbarians and the traitor sage were exchanging meaningful glances.

Aha.

"You", Zhao said and pointed at the sage chained to a pillar, "tell me what you know."

"What? Me? But I'm just a..." the sage began.

"I have no patience for your lies. You know something and if you don't tell me everything right now I will make sure you'll rot the rest of your life in a windowless cell."

The man hesitated but finally spoke: "I have never seen a firebender do such a thing, but there is a fairytale that says..."

Zhao might have thought the man was playing him for a fool if it weren't for the fact that he had learned long time ago that some stories that sounded like fairytales _were_ quite true. He had learned that in a library of all places.

This could be a lead, but it isn't the discriminating evidence I'm after.

"Fascinating", Zhao said with a tone dripping with disbelief. He wanted to make his enemy nervous.

"But I'm not interested in bedtime stories. If I were, I would've asked a nurse, not a sage. What I need to know is, what is the _punishment_ for using such interrogation techniques."

Truth be told, Zhao had no idea whether reading minds _was_ illegal, but it sure as hell _ought_ to be_.

If it was, however, it would give him a way to bring Zuko down.

Suddenly the head sage spoke: "Even if such a thing was possible, which it isn't, it might not be illegal or punishable in any ways. The difficult part about punishing such a crime would be proving it ever took place. No matter what the punishment, it could only be handed where there was evidence. Such are our ways in the Fire Nation."

The old man had some nerve to lecture Zhao when he and his sages had only moments ago allowed a twelve-year-old to outwit them.

The Commander was about to let the Fire Sage hear it, but was distracted by the gigantic doors as they began to slide open.

Finally.

Zhao turned to wait for his prey to show himself.

ooo

As Aang, Katara, Sokka and Momo were flying off to sunset in Appa's saddle, Aang told his friends about the Comet and how he would have to learn all the four elements before it arrived.

"Guys, do you think that if Zuko knows how to read minds, so does the Fire Lord?"

Sokka looked thoughtful: "With the information available to us we can't rule that out. Since we're now pretty sure this whole mindreading business exists but is really rare, it would make sense that just the most powerful firebenders can do it. Then the Fire Lord would definitely be on the list. Why do you ask?"

Aang gulped: "Because I have to defeat the Fire Lord before the end of the summer and it would be a start to know what I'm up against."

Katara hugged Aang, and promised to start teaching him waterbending right away.

ooo

The next morning

If Zuko had been traveling alone, he would've ridden through the night.

As it was, they had made camp.

Zuko hadn't wanted to wait, but having them both be tired and exhausted was a stupid move and an unnecessary risk. There was a real chance they were headed to a fight.

No one in the village would've been up in the dead of night anyway.

Zuko had barely slept at all, and when he had, his dreams had been filled with evil people hurting his mother. They all ended with everything on fire.

Zuko was more than happy to get back on his ostrich-horse in the morning.

He had expected getting Uncle to get up before dawn to prove difficult but, to his surprise, the old man made no complaints.

They were riding on the same ostrich-horses they had rented and eventually bought from the village of Kemi. According to Uncle they had paid horrible extra price for the mounts, but Zuko hadn't been in the mood to bargain at the time.

They may not be worth the money we paid, but they are good enough for our needs. Not a lot of places would be willing to sell an ostrich-horse to suspicious, most likely Fire Nation travelers anyway.

Zuko suspected Iroh had agreed to the deal because he thought Zuko wanted to keep his mount because he was particularly attached to it. That wasn't really the case.

Precious was unpredictable and moody. However, Zuko had been impressed by the way she had stuck around through an ambush _and_ a spirit attack. She was either very stupid or very loyal, and although Zuko seriously hoped for the latter, he could work with either.

They passed a crooked wooden structure that served as a city gate and dismounted their horses.

Zuko had once again chosen to cover his head and his hairdo with a scarf, but his scar was still drawing curious glances from people passing by.

The village was located far from the coast, but the near-by mountains made sure the area got a fair amount of rain each year, so the terrain wasn't arid.

The scenery composed of green, grassy valleys and rocky slopes. Some more protected patches even had trees despite the high altitude.

Like in most of Earth Kingdom, the main source of income here was agriculture, but herding appeared to be rather popular as well.

This place is... nothing like I pictured.

Since Zuko wasn't sure where to start looking, Uncle seized the moment: "It seems a small, metallic piece of Haystack's reins has fallen off and gone missing."

Uncle gave him a look that made sure to remind Zuko not to buy second-rate products in the future.

"There's a black smith's shop down the road", Zuko pointed out. He was not in a mood for I-told-you-so's.

As Zuko walked into the shop, a little clay bell above the door informed the shopkeeper there were customers.

"I'll be right over", a friendly female voice called from the back of

the shop.

Zuko froze in place.

Mother?

()))()

****A/N****

Ever wondered what happened to Zuko's mother? Read the next chapter to find out.

Also, in case you were wondering if the special mental power earthbenders can learn is something like what Toph can do, then the answer is yes, with a few twists.

All in all, healing for waterbenders is already so useful and different from usual waterbending that I didn't add much to that. And what can airbenders exactly do? It will be revealed later.

Simply put: water can heal the body, fire can connect with the spirit, earth comes with super senses and air is the opposite of earth.

11. Mother's Love

****A/N****

I got so many lovely reviews asking for a quick update that, well, here it comes.

()))()

****11. Mother's Love****

Zuko couldn't move. He couldn't speak and he couldn't hear anything. The only thing he knew for sure was that Uncle's hand was suddenly on his shoulder, holding him steady. Zuko felt grateful for the support.

After what felt like an eternity, the door behind the counter opened and a tall, beautiful woman in her forties walked in. She was wearing modest yet fitting Earth Kingdom green clothes and her long, black hair was on a customary braid.

She didn't yet see the two men standing in the shop. Her attention was on two little girls hanging on the hem of her dress. The girls looked at the strangers, especially at the scarred teenager, with fear in their eyes, and tried to hide behind their... mother?

This cannot be happening.

Ursa had time to say: "How can I help...?"

Then she lifted her gaze and the rest of the words got stuck in her throat. Instead she gasped and lifted her hand in front of her mouth. For a moment, the room was perfectly silent.

Ursa's gaze moved from Uncle to Zuko and back to Uncle. Eventually her eyes moved back to Zuko and stayed there.

Iroh was the first to break the silence: "Lady Ursa. I'm glad to see you are in health. It's been many years."

Before Ursa had time to say anything, the older and apparently braver of the two girls looked up to her and asked: "Mom, who are these people?"

Mom. I have... more baby sisters.

Zuko would've guessed the girls were three and four years old, which implied a lot of things Zuko couldn't quite comprehend right now.

Both girls were wearing clean if a bit worn green dresses. They had their mother's strong black hair, but their eyes were green.

All in all, they didn't look very firenationy, but Zuko still couldn't help being reminded of what Azula looked like at that age.

"Iroh", Ursa acknowledged Uncle with a small nod and turned her preserved eyes on the teenager standing next to the old man: "Zuko."

"Mom", was all Zuko managed to get out.

"Zuko, I'm glad to see you are alright. I know you have many questions and I promise to answer them soon, but let me first take the girls back to the house."

Before Zuko could find his voice, Uncle cut in: "Oh, yes. Lovely little girls you have there."

Uncle smiled at the girls with his most friendly, silly Uncle smile, but they still looked frightened.

"I wonder what their names are?" Iroh inquired not so subtly from Ursa.

Ursa hesitated only for a blink of an eye before answering.

"This is my youngest daughter, Aamu" Ursa said and pointed at the smaller girl still hiding behind her hem, "and this is my oldest, Alina."

Oldestâ€|? What about me and Azula? Isn't she happy to see me?

"Girls, these are mother's old friends, Iroh and Zuko. Be nice to them."

Zuko's cheeks paled even further._This is bad on so many levels._

Ursa knelt to talk to her daughters: "Everything is alright, but I think your father would be disappointed not to be here to greet our guests. Alina, why don't you take your little sister back to the

house and then run over to the smithy to get your father?"

Alina, obviously suspecting something was out of place despite her mother's words, looked suspiciously at the two strangers. Eventually she nodded and did what she was told.

As the girls left the room, Ursa turned back to Zuko. In two long strides, she closed the distance between them, and embraced Zuko in her arms. Zuko was so surprised by this that it took him a while to realize he was in fact crying to her shoulder.

After a while, Ursa pulled back, but only enough to get a good look at Zuko. His face. The scar.

Oh no.

Zuko turned his head to hide the left side of his face, but Ursa said: "No. Don't hide from me. It only serves me right to see what I've done."

Zuko was confused: "You didn't... you haven't done anything. It's my fault, I spoke insolently, I..."

"And I wasn't there to protect you."

Like a dragon parent would have been.

"Zuko, you have to know that I love you very much and I wouldn't have left you if there had been any other way."

"So why did you?" Zuko's voice was far from steady but he barely cared.

Ursa's face was sad and serious: "It's complicated."

It's my fault.

Ursa, obviously having heard something, took a few steps back from Zuko.

A moment later a tall, broad-shouldered man also in his forties stepped into the room with the girls in his tow. He was wearing usual Earth Kingdom clothing, on top of which he had an apron and a considerable amount of soot.

From his heavy breathing Zuko could tell the man had been running. He still had a large hammer in his hand.

"Sari, is everything okay?" the man said, sounding more confused than threatening but obviously ready to take them on if need be.

"Everything's fine, Kato", Ursa repeated with an encouraging smile, "I was just hoping you could look after the children while I have a word with some... old friends."

The two exchanged meaningful looks. Zuko wished he knew more of what was going on.

"It's quite alright", Ursa assured him.

Reluctantly the man called Kato left the room, although Zuko suspected he didn't go far. Zuko wasn't sure whether to like or dislike the man for his desire to keep Ursa away from him.

"We should go somewhere more private to speak. This way", Ursa led Zuko and Iroh through the back door and a corridor to a small dining hall. She gestured them to take seats.

"You must have much to ask", she said.

All my questions will finally be answered.

Another thought Zuko wasn't sure whether to like or dislike.

Everyone seemed to be expecting Zuko to say something, but the only thing he could think of to ask was why Ursa had left, and Zuko feared he didn't really want to know the answer.

_This isn't going at all like I thought it would go. No bad guys of varying sorts in s__ight__. Just a happy family. _We_ are the only intruders here._

Zuko felt guilty for his thoughts.

How could I be an intruder in my mother's home?

"How did you find me?" Ursa broke the silence.

Now it was Zuko and Uncle's turn to exchange glances.

Zuko didn't want to lie, but telling that particular part as the first thing he would tell about the last six years of his life seemed a little... radical. He was also sort of under an oath not to tell anyone about the Order...

"It doesn't matter", Zuko said, "when I found out you could be... that you were still alive, I had to find you. I had to be sure. I had to make sure you were okay."

Ursa smiled but there was sadness in her eyes.

Exactly the mother I remember.

"That's very sweet of you, but as you can see, I'm fine", Ursa said and then asked, "Who all know that I'm here?"

"No one but us", Iroh told her, "at least no one that we know of. And considering the amount of trouble we went through to find you, I seriously doubt anyone else could do it even if they tried their hardest."

Ursa gave Iroh a quick smile: "That's good. I hate to sound so practical about this, but it is of utmost importance that no one knows I'm here."

"You're afraid for your children", Zuko said, his voice oddly toneless.

_That's what _my_mother would do._

"Yes", Ursa looked at Zuko like she was trying to solve a puzzle, "my family would be in grave danger if anyone from the Fire Nation found us. Or if the people of this village found out where I am from."

"I take it Kato knows", Uncle's voice was almost conversational but there was intensity in his eyes.

"Yes. When I came to Earth Kingdom, I had very little money and I knew no one. I took on a new name, Sari. At first I traveled a lot, doing odd jobs. Eventually I settled down in a town where I had a steady income. There I met some nice and helpful people, Kato being one of them."

"He's a good man and I was fortunate to meet him. When he asked for my hand I told him the truth about my past. I couldn't base our life on a lie."

"How did he take it?" Uncle asked politely. Zuko was grateful someone was keeping up a conversation because he himself wouldn't probably have been able to say anything. Not anything light or polite, anyway.

"He was shocked, of course, and naturally he had his doubts, but he didn't leave. Eventually we decided the past didn't matter."

"He left his old life and relatives behind as well, fearing that they would find out where I came from and not be... understanding. We write to them sometimes, but his relatives live half across the Kingdom from here, so it is mainly just the two of us. And the children, of course."

"I'm guessing your husband is not a bender", Iroh said, raising his brow inquisitively.

"No. And nor are my children, thank the spirits", Ursa said but, after seeing the look on Zuko's face, she quickly added, "I mean, my youngest children aren't benders."

"Not that there is anything wrong with being a bender, it's just... safer that way. And simpler. The girls don't know about my past, and we intend to keep it that way until they are much older. I'm sure you understand."

Zuko understood. In fact, his mind had understood the whole conversation and more. Too bad his heart wasn't as understanding.

Ursa shook her head: "But that's enough about me. What about you? How have you been doing... after?"

Zuko swallowed, but when he spoke, his voice sounded calmer than he had expected: "I've missed you. But I'm fine. I'm... and Azula is fine, too."

Mother hadn't asked about Azula, but despite that, or maybe even because of it, Zuko wanted to emphasize that part: "Azula misses you too. A lot. We thought you died. But she's doing well now. Still ahead of everyone else in all her studies."

Ursa smiled, but there were tears in the corners of her eyes: "I'm glad to hear it. What about you?"

"I'm... banished."

As Zuko saw the expression in his mother's eyes and the glance to his scar, he suspected she had already known that.

Ursa looked so sad Zuko had to say something to let her know it was okay. The only problem was that nothing about his life _was_ okay.

"But once I capture the Avatar, I will be allowed to go home again, and it won't probably be long now. I've gotten pretty close a couple of times already", Zuko tried to sound confident.

Mother's banished, too, and she won't be able to come home even if I do capture the Avatar.

Zuko looked up from his hands, but Ursa didn't look offended. She still looked sad, though.

"Capturing the Avatar sounds... dangerous", Ursa put in.

Zuko hadn't thought it that way, but he tried to quickly mend his mistake: "Well it's not. Not really. The Avatar is a 12-year-old pacifist who doesn't want to hurt a mosquito-fly. I'll be fine."

Zuko was extremely nervous about the next part, but he had to say it: "Butâ€¦ if you think it's too dangerous and don't want me to go after the Avatar then... maybe I could _not_ go. Maybe I could just stay here instead?"

The last part came out in such a rush the words were partially blurred together. Maybe that was the reason why Ursa looked so surprised.

"You mean... stay here, as in, stay in this village", she finally got out.

She was supposed to look happy. She was supposed to smile and say it was a wonderful idea.

Staying would mean Zuko could never go home, so he had felt conflicted about whether he should ask for it or not. However, now that he had actually found his mother, there was no doubt in his mind about which he wanted more.

Mother wasn't smiling: "I... I have to talk about that with Kato... this is all a bit sudden..."

Now that Zuko was here, with his mother, there was nowhere else on earth he'd rather be. This made his sudden desire to be somewhere, anywhere else, a bit controversial.

Zuko didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything. He was afraid that if he got his answer, it would once and for all eradicate the hope that had been building inside his chest ever since he had

found out Ursa could be alive.

Uncle got the conversation going again: "I'm sure sudden is the word we're all looking for. Thankfully there is no rush. We have time to..."

"I promise I'd be better. I wouldn't get in the way", Zuko was now almost pleading, "I would never let anything bad happen to you or my sisters or your husband. I'll prove it if you let me."

"Zuko, it's just not that simple", Ursa was crying now. Zuko wasn't sure if he had ever seen her cry. There was often a sad look in her eyes but tears? Never.

"Why were you banished?" Zuko asked.

If Ursa was surprised that he knew she'd been banished, she didn't show it: "I did something wrong. Something bad. But I did it because I love you, both you and your sister, very much."

"Do you still love me?" someone with Zuko's voice asked.

Ursa tried to hug him but he pulled away from her.

"Of course I do. Why would you ask such a thing?"

And again, the fault is mine. I'm the one who doesn't understand.

"But you don't want me to stay", Zuko couldn't stop now that he'd started.

Ursa said nothing so Zuko went on: "You say you left because you love me, and I do believe you really didn't have a choice, but what about now? Why don't you want me this time?"

What's wrong with me?

"It's not that I don't love you", Ursa said through tears, "but things have changed. There are other things to consider. There's great danger in you staying here. For all of us. And what would your Father say?"

"My Father wouldn't say anything!" Zuko was shouting now. "Just like he hasn't said anything to me in the last three years! He doesn't know or care where I am or what I'm doing. So don't tell me you're worried about how he would feel. He wouldn't know the difference!"

Ursa looked sad but resigned: "Zuko, I have no right to ask this of you, but I need you to be reasonable. Surely you see that if you stayed, someone would eventually come looking for you. Or someone would find out you're a firebender. Either way, I can't take that risk. I can't put my children's lives on the line like that."

Zuko found it hard to be reasonable when all he could think of was that he was no longer part of the children her mother talked of and cared about.

Nor is Azula, and probably wasn't even before Mother was banished.

We don't matter to her._

"It wouldn't be like that. I can stay hidden. I can keep a secret", Zuko tried one last desperate time.

"I can't take that risk. I won't. I will not risk having to raise my children as outcast, on the run or worse", Ursa was adamant, "the answer is no."

_She doesn't trust me. She thinks I'm bad (like Fat__her). She doesn't want me anywhere near her _real_ children._

If Mother wanted me to live with her, she would've looked me up years ago. She knew I'd been banished. If she really wanted me around, she would've found a way.

But she didn't.

"Stop that right now" an unfamiliar male voice demanded.

Zuko hadn't noticed Kato coming in. Nor had he noticed there were flames around his own fists. Zuko quickly put them out.

Before Zuko or Ursa had time to say anything, Uncle got up.

"I am a guest in your house and I would hate to show bad manners, but if you take another step towards my nephew you'll leave me no choice but to do exactly that."

"I want you both to leave", Kato said, looking evenly into Iroh's eyes.

"No, it is okay, Kato", Ursa tried to reassure her husband, "it was an accident. Zuko wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Are you even listening to yourself? Why do you keep making excuses for people who treated you so badly?" Kato was now talking to Ursa.

Ursa was suddenly fierce: "You do not speak of Zuko in that tone in my presence."

Everyone but Zuko was on their feet now.

The Prince had difficulty keeping his breathing even. A flood of memories was threatening to take him over.

Mom and Dad are fighting. Again. And it's my fault. It's always my fault.

I am not what I'm supposed to be.

Zuko got up and run out the room. He couldn't hear anything past the blood rushing in his ears, so he didn't know if anyone called after him. He was out of the house before anyone had time to stop him.

My mother was banished because of me. Azula wasn't lying. Ozai wants me dead. Ursa doesn't want me. Everything's all wrong and it's all my fault.

ooo

Iroh rushed past Kato and Ursa without giving either as much as a second glance. He really felt like shouting at them, especially at Ursa, how Zuko was a wonderful young man and didn't deserve to be tossed aside like this.

_If only you _knew_ him, your own son, like I do._

Iroh held back, however. Mainly because he was in a hurry to go after Zuko, but also in case the girls were listening in.

No need to cause any more resentment than we already have.

"Wait!" Ursa shouted after him, "There's something I need you to tell Zuko."

Uncle didn't stop to listen.

My nephew needs me more.

Iroh burst out of the house, but Zuko was no longer in sight. Iroh looked around almost frantically, calling out for his nephew and asking from people passing by if they'd seen a boy with a scar, but Zuko was nowhere to be found.

ooo

Zuko was running. Not looking where he was going, not caring where he ended up.

He had nowhere to go. Nothing in his life was worth going back for.

Zuko fell to the ground, no longer able to breathe. He felt like his heart would burst out of his chest.

On some level he had always known what had happened during that night six years ago. He'd just refused to believe in it until now. He'd refused to believe Ozai would do that. He hadn't _wanted_ to know what Ursa had been willing to do to save his life.

Zuko vaguely realized he was at the moors, the morning mist still lingering all around him. The village was somewhere so far away Zuko could no longer see even an outline of it.

As Zuko looked around himself, he realized he wasn't alone. There was someone else in the mist. Someone Zuko knew.

Tuli was standing a few meters from him, her huge, white frame looking unreal and ethereal in the fog. The dragon had her head turned toward the Sun, but her eyes were on Zuko. A single tear was running down her face.

We've both been alone and forgotten too long.

The dragon touched Zuko's cheek.

I'm sorry for having brought this pain on you, cub.

Zuko wasn't bitter. He knew what he had to do.

There was no going back. The only way was forward. It was time to let go, and Zuko was ready.

Their minds and intentions as one, the dragon spirit opened her massive jaws and breathed out fire.

It wasn't like any fire Zuko had ever seen. The multicolored flame didn't burn him as it danced around his body. Zuko wasn't afraid of it.

The only way is forward.

As the flames died out, the magnificent white dragon was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Prince Zuko. In his place stood a small, black dragon.

The dragon was young, made obvious by his small size and the small number and size of his fangs. If you looked very closely, you could tell the dragon had no mane around his left eye.

The black dragon opened his wings for the first time in his life, and flew away.

()))()

****A/N****

Did I just tear Zuko emotionally apart and then turn him into a dragon? Yes, I did. I'll explain the logic behind the transformation later.

If you want a more intimate perspective on how Zuko feels right now, I suggest you take another look at the Prologue, which takes place between this chapter and the next.

A picture made by your truly of what DragonZuko looks like can be found at

[.com/art/DragonZuko-286727059](http://www.deviantart.com/art/DragonZuko-286727059)

I know some of you may feel that Ursa wasn't written in character in this fanfic, since in the show she is described as a supermom who would never do anything to hurt her children, but I had my reasons.

First: in the series we see Ursa through Zuko's loving eyes, and Zuko is no judge in these things. Zuko thinks his father is an upright guy when not busy molesting his children.

Second: since in this story Ursa wasn't a prisoner for the six years she was missing, why didn't she contact Zuko? You would think she would've sent a letter or something to make sure her favorite child was okay after a traumatizing banishment?

Sure, she wouldn't want to hurt Zuko with the truth about Ozai, but at this point...

Was there really some rule that stopped her from secretly

reconnecting with her child? Or maybe she simply didn't know Zuko had been banished, but at that point, she must not have cared very much if she didn't keep any tabs on her children's lives.

Since, in my idea of Ursa, she was a strong and caring woman, it would take something pretty big to keep her away. Like, say, the safety of her new family.

And why should we presume Ursa's life revolved around Zuko and, after being forcibly separated from him, her life ended?

Sure, it couldn't have been easy to be banished, presumed dead, and have to stay under everyone's radar for dear life. It doesn't mean she couldn't have moved on with her own life in the three years before Zuko got banished.

Family is important to her, and since she thought she'd never be reunited with her old one, she built a new one instead.

Ursa loves Zuko so much she gave up the life she knew to save his life. Once.

12. New Perspectives

****12. New Perspectives****

"Oh no! It's a dead end! Now what do we do?" Sokka turned to look at Aang and Katara, "we have to think of something and fast before the bloodthirsty pirates catch up!"

"Oh man, if only I still had my glider I could try to fly us out of here", Aang looked at the fans in his hands with disappointment, "that won't happen with these things."

"It's not your fault", Katara consoled the young monk, "and you wouldn't probably have been able to carry the three of us anyway."

"Arr!" a ferocious sound echoed from behind a corner.

"Here they come", Sokka gulped but took his fighting stance nonetheless.

No matter what Katara says, it is sort of my fault, Aang thought. I'm the Avatar. If I can't even save my friends, how can I save the world?

"Catch those thieving otter-snakes!" A pirate yelled. He and his numerous companions began advancing on the children.

Aang didn't want to hurt anyone, but he had to protect his friends. He wasn't yet a fully realized Avatar, but he was an airbending prodigy.

Sokka used his boomerang to take out two guys. Katara used the water in her water skin to create a slippery floor, which took down a few more pirates. Aang blew the rest out of their way with his fans and shouted to his friends: "We have to go back this way. Follow me."

As Team Avatar was almost past their enemies and out of the dead end, one of the pirates took out a handful of smoke bombs. The thick smoke made it hard for Aang to see where he was going. He could only hope the pirates were just as confused.

"Sokka! Katara!" Aang called out.

"I'm... somewhere!" Sokka called back, and added, "Let's split up and rendezvous where we left Appa!"

"What about the watch tower?" Katara asked. "It's much closer."

"Sure, but I'm willing to bet my boomerang the pirates just heard that, too."

Aang looked around in the smoke, still not seeing much. Sokka was right. "Okay, we'll meet up at Appa."

Aang decided the best way he could help his friends was by attracting as much attention as possible on him.

The Air Nomad did a swirling airbending kata to clear off smoke around himself, revealing his location to everyone near-by. As Aang had hoped that caused most of the pirates to follow him as he took them out on another wild chase around the town.

ooo

Sokka had his arms stretched in front of him as he stumbled forward. He'd just gotten through most of the smoke and could now see a few meters ahead of him.

Making the most of his newly gained sight, Sokka started running.

He got to an end of a street, but his sense of direction was still not working properly, so he wasn't sure which street he was on. Sokka ran behind a corner and realized he was heading back towards the docks.

Well that's not where I want to go.

Sokka turned around to leave but before he had time know what hit him, the world went black.

ooo

Iroh was heading back to the town after having spent the entire afternoon searching the village and the near-by moors for Zuko. What Iroh had found on the grassy hills raised more questions than it answered.

A major spiritual happening had taken place not far from the village, of this Iroh was sure.

His trip to the Spirit World six years ago had opened his eyes, and other senses, to be far keener on spiritual happenings than what most people's senses were.

Even so keen that it was sometimes a bit of an inconvenience when a

passing spirit caught Iroh's attention when it really should've been on the present.

This time Iroh was nothing but grateful for his insight on spiritual matters, though. Any clues to Zuko's whereabouts, even vague ones, were welcome at this point.

Iroh was almost certain he had not sensed much spiritual presence in the vicinity when arriving this morning.

There was a possibility he had simply overlooked it, but Iroh doubted that.

If the spiritual activities were recent, as Iroh presumed they were, there was a very good chance they were connected to his nephew's sudden disappearance.

Zuko, where are you?

Iroh couldn't shake of the feeling that the spiritual place he'd found at the moors and the spiritual encounter Zuko had had the other night had to be connected.

Zuko had been awful quiet after his meeting with the Dragon Spirit, but Uncle had dismissed it as the kind of quiet that was caused by the awe every man felt after meeting a spirit for the first time.

He had even thought it was excitement over reuniting with Ursa. Iroh hadn't thought Zuko had been _withholding information_ from him. Not before now.

What was the exact deal Zuko made with the spirit? I really should have asked for more details.

Iroh felt exceptionally old when re-entering the town. He knew there was no points in letting your worries get the best of you.

Still, Zuko was like a second son to him and Iroh couldn't bear the thought of losing him, too.

One way or another, Iroh was relatively certain Zuko wasn't coming back to this place.

Not after the way the meeting with Ursa had gone.

However, it still didn't hurt to check the village one last time before returning to the ship to wait for Zuko. Iroh wasn't about to let his confidence in his deductive abilities get the best of him.

Also, their ostrich-horses were still parked outside the smithy.

ooo

Ouch.

Sokka's head ached. It was a jamming kind of pain that wouldn't let him rest.

He opened his eyes but had to blink a few times to get a sense of his surroundings.

Sokka was lying on a blanket on top of a haystack. He was in a dark small room, or quite possibly a tent.

How did I get here?

Suddenly Sokka remembered that the pirates had attacked him.

Oh no! I'm being held captive by pirates! I've got to think of something.

Sokka tried to feel around himself for anything that could be used as a weapon. To his great surprise, the pirates had left all his stuff, his boomerang and machete included, next to the blanket.

Okay... Not very bright pirates.

Sokka gathered his things quietly. He got to his feet but had to pause for a while as the world started spinning uncomfortably.

Sokka touched his head to feel for any injuries only to find that someone had already bandaged it.

Feeling his every step carefully, Sokka began to make his way towards a little glint of light that came from under a cloth working as a door.

Sokka was only halfway to the door when he heard something.

The Water Tribe boy stopped moving and listened intently, picking up more words of the loud conversation as it approached.

"... potentially important information out of the prisoner", An unfamiliar man's voice finished.

I'll tell them nothing, Sokka decided.

To Sokka's surprise, the next speaker was a woman. _Odd. _Sokka didn't recall seeing any women among the pirates.

"It's not our policy to take prisoners and you know it. This is a bad idea. Also, I have difficulty understanding why you picked this prisoner _particularly_."

"We have a reason to believe this particular prisoner has valuable information on local Fire Nation outposts", the man defended his case.

No... I don't.

Sokka wondered what the pirates would do with that sort of information anyway.

"No, we don't", the woman responded and added. "Do you really think I don't see why you picked _her_ out of them all?"

"_That_ had nothing to do with..." the man tried to answer but was interrupted.

"We both know she wasn't taken a prisoner for information gathering! She isn't even an officer!" the woman shouted.

Suddenly the piece of cloth that marked the door was pulled aside

"And you", Ilya said. "You are not supposed to be out of bed!"

For a moment, all Sokka could do was blink. Now he officially had no idea what was going on.

"I've been kidnapped byâ€¦ the Earth Kingdom Militia?" he guessed.

Ilya and the older man Sokka didn't know stared at him for a while before the man corrected him: "No. You've been saved by the Earth Kingdom Militia."

Sokka looked puzzled: "I've been... what?"

"Ilya", the man addressed the young woman. "See to it that our... guest has everything he needs. And on the earlier topic: I don't want to hear another word of it. I'm in charge of this camp, and you'd do well to remember that."

The man walked away.

"Okay, I'm still confused", Sokka confessed.

Ilya glared at him before rolling her eyes and answering: "We saw a bunch of thugs carrying you around. They said you'd stolen from them. Had you?"

"What? Stolen from the pirates? No."

"We didn't think so, either", Ilya said, "and despite what your bestest buddy the Avatar thinks of the Militia, we are a pretty decent bunch. So we fought the pirates until it wasn't worth it for them to keep you as a prisoner. Then we brought you here.

"We actually saw quite a bit of trouble to save your sorry ass, so a little gratitude wouldn't hurt", she added, "And when I tell you you shouldn't be out of bed, you really should realize to get back to bed. Do I have to make you?"

"Wow, I can't stay here!" Sokka realized, "I gotta find my friends and make sure they are okay. Are Katara and Aang here?"

Ilya shook her head: "We found you alone with the pirates. We saw no signs of the Avatar or your sister."

"Man! They must be getting worried for me. How long was I out?" Sokka rubbed his bandaged head.

"Almost the whole day", Ilya answered, looking a bit more sympathetic, "We were starting to get worried. You lost quite a bit of blood from the cut in your head before we got a chance to bandage it."

"The whole day? Oh no. Then Katara and Aang are super worried. They'll think I've been caught by the pirates."

"You were caught by the pirates", Ilya pointed out, "Look, I understand your concern but there is nothing you can do about it right now. Not in your condition. You need to lay down and rest."

"Nah, I'm fine", Sokka said, and took a step forward to prove his point.

And if only the world had held still.

Ilya was suddenly next to him, supporting him with her body. She guided Sokka back to the make-shift bunk at the back of the tent.

"Look", Ilya began, "How about I tell our scouts that if they are to run into the Avatar, they'll let him know you are okay and at our camp. How does that sound?"

"It... sounds pretty good", Sokka couldn't think of a better solution.

Ilya told Sokka to lay still as she went to tell a friend to tell a friend to tell a scout. She returned soon with a bowl of soup in hand. Sokka accepted it more than gladly. He was starving.

"What is this place, anyway?" Sokka asked to start a conversation.

"A temporary camp. We're headed north, but I can't tell you exactly where we're going. I can tell you that we are some distance away from the port we found you at."

"Okay", Sokka mumbled while sipping the last of his soup, " So, I guess you're right. I should probably thank you guys for saving me."

Ilya waved her hand, dismissing the topic: "Truth be told, we've had trouble with those pirates before. We barely need an excuse to pick a fight with them."

"I'm not surprised", Sokka commented, "I mean, they attacked me and my friends without any provocation. I should think they would've made a lot of enemies with that tactic."

"Don't know about that, but you got lucky we happened to be near-by", she sighed, looking suddenly sheepish, "and that we chose to rescue you. I mean, it took some convincing to get the others to rescue a friend of the Avatar after he didn't give us his support."

"Yeah, we didn't exactly depart as best friends. So why did you save me?"

"Even if the Avatar doesn't like the Militia, he is still the best chance our kingdom has to win the war. Or, well, at least that's what I told the boys", Ilya explained.

"So does that mean it's you I owe to?" Sokka inquired.

Ilya actually blushed for a moment, shaking her head.

Her voice, however, held solid: "Hardly. I didn't do it for you. It was just the right thing to do."

"But wait a second", Sokka's mind was slowly processing what he had learned so far, "Earlier I heard you guys talking about a prisoner. If it isn't me, then who?"

"Are you always this paranoid?" Ilya rolled her eyes, "Well, we weren't talking about you, obviously. We've got another prisoner. A Fire Nation soldier."

Reading her face, Sokka could tell this fact bothered her.

"I thought you guys weren't trying to pick a fight with the Fire Nation?"

"Sometimes we don't have a choice. Fighting them is kind of unavoidable in our line of work. Truth be told, I don't think all of us even want to avoid it", Ilya said.

"Everyone hates the Fire Nation", Sokka commented, "So why do you have a problem with the Militia fighting them?"

"I don't", the young woman defended herself, "I hate the Fire Nation, too. It's just... too much hatred sometimes makes people lose sight of what fights are really important. They throw away their principles for simple retribution, and without principles we really are the rag-tag bunch of thugs almost everyone already thinks we are."

Sokka nodded. He thought he understood that: "You fear the Militia attracts wrong kind of people. The kind that would rather destroy Fire Nation stuff than help build schools."

"Exactly! I mean, don't get me wrong. I believe in the Militia, I really do. It's just sometimes... like today, for example... when I'm not sure if even we know what we are fighting for."

Ilya's face was calm, but her eyes were burning with something Sokka couldn't put a finger on.

There's something she's not telling me. Something important.

Ilya's hair was longer than Sokka had remembered. On their earlier encounter she'd worn it on a bun, but now that her black hair was on a long braid, it reached almost to her waist.

The girl was wearing a loose, dark green tunic with a wide belt around the waist. Under the tunic she wore a wide-sleeved shirt and loose trousers. No shoes, as was traditional for earthbenders.

All in all, Ilya's look was so traditionally Earth Kingdom that it was hard to guess this young woman was a freedom fighter. Which was probably the whole point.

The only even slightly noticeable thing about Ilya's appearance was that she had wide, jade bracelets on both her wrists. Sokka guessed

they were important to her, maybe a gift or family jewels.

The silence made Sokka feel uneasy, so he quickly thought of another conversation opener: "So... this prisoner you have... did I hear someone say it was a 'she'?"

"Yes", was all Ilya said.

"And that's why you have a problem with it?"

"I have a problem with it because I've been taught that it's wrong to treat anyone, even your enemies, with unnecessary cruelty", she answered.

One look at Sokka's face told her he wasn't following her line of thought, so Ilya began to explain: "In Earth Kingdom, women aren't allowed to join the Army. It's not considered... feminine."

"Yeah, the Water Tribes think it's a man's job to fight, too", Sokka told her.

"The Fire Nation has female soldiers, but because the concept of women fighting is bizarre to our culture, most of our soldiers don't... get it."

"Hey, but what about you? You're a woman fighting", Sokka pointed out.

"Yes, I am. But I'm not in the Army. The Militia enlists women, though mainly to compensate for the shortage on able men. We need every bender who's willing to fight and hasn't already joined the Army, which pretty much means women. Though not even Militia takes women if they're married or mothers", Ilya clarified.

"Not everyone in the Militia is as radical as some of our ideals are. Not even close", Ilya went on, "My point is that most Earth Kingdom soldiers, Militia and Army alike, don't see the enemy's female soldiers as soldiers at all. They see them as something that shouldn't be. Something evil."

"Soldiers fight because they have their orders, but since women aren't soldiers, they must be doing it because they are exceptionally ruthless and evil, even inhuman. That's why our soldiers sometimes treat them... inhumanly."

Ilya looked disgusted for a moment before continuing: "Fighting and killing on the front lines where it's either you or him I get, but hurting people when you don't have to..."

Sokka thought about that for a moment. His recent visit to Kyoshi Island had opened his eyes to the fact that girls were no worse fighters than men.

However, if Sokka hadn't been there, he wasn't sure how he would've taken to the concept of Fire Nation enlisting women. To him, it sounded coward-like of them to make their women fight for them, but Ilya had a point, too.

"So, you think she's being treated worse than prisoners of war usually are because she's a woman?" Sokka wanted to confirm he'd

gotten it right. Ilya nodded.

"But", Sokka had to point out, "woman or man, she is a Fire Nation soldier. They are all evil, so odds are she's getting what's coming for her."

Ilya looked furious.

"It doesn't matter how born-and-bred evil they might be. It doesn't give us an excuse to go down to their level. No one deserves to be treated inhumanly!"

A bit calmer, she added: "Also, I'm not even sure everyone from the Fire Nation is evil. Not anymore. I know, blasphemy to say such things."

Ilya rolled her eyes before continuing, but there was no humor in the gesture.

"I've seen Fire Nation soldiers do decent, even good things. Like the first time we met. That one Fire Nation soldier risked his life trying to save an Earth Kingdom village because it was the right thing to do."

It took Sokka a while to realize who Ilya was referring to.

"Hold on. You're not trying to say that Prince Zuko is your moral idol? 'Cause I've met him before and I've gotta break this to you: that guy is nothing but trouble. He didn't do what he did for any noble reasons."

"I don't know what his motives were", Ilya admitted, "Still, back at Halti, he was the only one who stood up for what was right even when it meant he had to make a stand against his own people. He did what the rest of us should have been doing."

"Hey! The way I remember it, you were the one who practically sat on the rest of us to stop us from acting", Sokka reminded Ilya.

"Those were my orders. It still doesn't make what that Zuko guy did any lesser."

Sokka didn't understand: "So what exactly are you getting at with all this?"

Ilya took a deep breath: "What bothers me is that I feel like I'm a worse person than this Zuko guy. Worse than some Fire Nation soldier. In fact, I feel so bad about this whole thing I'd like to..."

Ilya didn't finish her sentence. When she glanced at Sokka, her eyes had a weary edge to them, almost as if she was afraid she'd said too much.

"I really should stop bothering you with my rants and let you get some rest", Ilya changed the topic.

Before Sokka had time to say anything, she was up and out of the tent.

ooo

The sun was already setting and Sokka was still nowhere to be found.

This is all my fault, was the only thing Katara could think of._
The stupid scroll is so not worth _this.

Katara sat at an end of a pier. The moment she and Aang had realized Sokka wasn't coming to the rendezvous point, she'd confessed to Aang that she'd taken the waterbending scroll. Not knowing what else to do, they had returned to the town, ready to take on the pirates to save Sokka. The only problem was that the pirates had no longer been docked to the harbor.

Aang had taken Appa to search the near-by waters for the pirate ship. Katara had stayed behind to search the town in case Sokka hadn't been caught but was hiding somewhere instead.

She'd already searched the town from top to bottom twice and even gone back to their rendezvous place a few times to see if Sokka had returned there. She'd found no signs of her brother.

Katara began crying even though she'd promised herself that she'd be strong. Momo, who had stayed with Katara to help her in her search, sat on Katara's lap. As she sat there petting the lemur, she felt absolutely terrible.

If something bad has happened to him, I'll never forgive myself.

Suddenly, somebody called from behind her: "Girl. Yes, you there."

Katara turned around and saw a boy probably about her age approaching her.

"Are you the one who's looking for that fellow that the pirates chased down?" the boy asked.

Katara was on her feet so quickly she dropped Momo: "Yes, yes I am! Have you seen him? Do you know where he is?"

To Katara's great irritation, the boy took his time answering. Eventually, he said: "I may have seen something."

"Then tell me what you know. Please. He's my brother and he could be in trouble", Katara pleaded.

"Oh, he's in trouble alright. Never a good idea to steal from the pirates", the boy said smugly.

"Tell me at once", Katara was running out of patience.

"Sure, sure. What's it worth to you?"

"Worth? He's my brother!"

"I meant how much have you got to give me for my trouble", the boy clarified, keeping his calm. He'd probably done this sort of thing

before.

Katara had just about had it: "Tell me right now or I'll make you wish you had!"

The boy didn't look concerned: "And then who's gonna tell you? 'Cause I'm telling you, Sugar, no one's gonna give you anything without a price around here. In this port, everything is for sale, which means everything comes with a price."

Katara tried to calm herself. She hated this whole port and all its unhelpful inhabitants.

"I... I have a copper coin."

"Please. A copper coin? No deal."

"I have two copper coins. But that's really all I have. You can take them or keep your information to yourself. I'm sure no one else cares to buy it from you", Katara bargained.

The boy considered that: "Throw in that pretty necklace of yours and I'll tell."

Katara called forth water from the sea beneath the pier. She threw a wave at the boy, but the boy dodged and took out a pocket knife.

Before Katara could think of another attack, a sudden gush of wind knocked the boy down. Appa swooshed over Katara's head and Aang jumped down, fans at hand.

"I'm not going to let you hurt Katara", he said.

Katara felt irritated. Even if Aang was a far better bender than she was he didn't have to rub it in at every turn: "I didn't need you to save me! I had everything under control!"

Aang looked shocked, even a bit hurt.

I shouldn't shout at him. Katara bit her lip. It's not him I'm angry at.

"Sorry, Aang", Katara said more kindly. "Did you find the ship?"

Aang shook his head, looking almost as miserable as she felt.

Katara turned to look at the boy who was now sprawled on the ground. Katara was still holding a globe of water in her hands.

"Tell me everything you know."

"Fine", the boy said, his eyes never leaving the globe in Katara's hands. "I saw the pirates knocking a kid out. He was wearing blue clothes a bit like yours. And when I say they hit him, I mean, they really took a swing at him. His head was bleeding and all."

"Oh no", Katara exhaled, already seeing all the worst possible scenarios in her head.

"The pirates were dragging the kid back to their ship, but then these Militia people showed up and started to pick a fight."

"Militia?" Aang asked and looked at Katara, who was as surprised as Aang was.

"Yeah, Militia. A big bunch of them. And one of them said she knew the boy and they argued with the pirates about it. And then they fought."

"The Militia fought the pirates?" Katara asked, still stunned. "Then what?"

"The Militia won. Sort of. They told the pirates to get lost."

"What about Sokka? Who got Sokka?" Katara insisted to know.

"Not sure."

Katara lifted the water globe.

"No! Seriously, I'm not sure! It wasn't safe to be standing right next to the battle. But I think the Militia took him. That's all I know."

Katara and Aang looked at one another.

"You think they rescued him?" Aang asked more from Katara than from the boy on the ground.

"I don't know", Katara said. "But we're going to find out."

ooo

Ursa was sitting by a window, waiting for any sign of Zuko or Iroh's return. She didn't like the way their encounter had ended.

So many things I should have said. So many things I should have done.

Finally, when the sun had already set, Iroh came back. Ursa walked out to the yard to meet him.

"Iroh", she said to catch his attention. Ursa noticed Zuko wasn't with his uncle. She could guess why. "He doesn't want to see me again."

Iroh took a breath and turned to look at Ursa. He looked tired.

"I don't know where Zuko is", Iroh finally said.

"What? What do you mean?" Ursa was now worried.

It was unlike of Zuko to run away without telling anyone where he was going. Or at least it had been unlike of the _Zuko_ she'd once known.

"So, he hasn't returned here", Iroh sighed to himself, clearly not

having expected Zuko to have done so.

"He is hurt, isn't he?" Ursa had to ask.

Iroh took another deep breath before answering: "Emotionally? Undoubtedly. Physically? I don't know. Zuko hasn't had it easy these past few years. Far from it. You were... hard on him."

"I know", Ursa said. "But you must see that it is impossible for him to stay here."

"Even so, Zuko is your son", Iroh looked Ursa in the eye. "And he needs you just as much as your other children do. It is your responsibility to help him even when it's... inconvenient. As a parent, you don't get to cherry pick which of your children you like the best."

"I know", Ursa repeated shortly.

After her banishment, Ursa hadn't expected to ever to see Zuko or Azula again. The pain of having to leave them behind had been almost unbearable, but there had been no other way.

Ozai would never have allowed Ursa to take the children with her. Also, a life of a fugitive was no life for a young child.

She liked to think she had made the right decision that night, but it had been a long time since she'd been sure.

"I often told myself that there was no other way. That my children would be better off raised in a palace. But sometimes, especially after what happened to Zuko, I wonder. I wonder if I simply abandoned my children into the hands of a monster."

Ursa knew it was risky of her to criticize Ozai this openly to his brother without knowing where Iroh stood on the matter.

Well, everything about today's meeting has been risky. I should just thank the spirits it was only Zuko and Iroh who found me.

"I don't know my niece as well as I should, but Zuko I do know. He is a wonderful child. He's suffered more than anyone should and he's struggling to find his way, but even after all that's happened to him, he hasn't grown cold or cruel", Iroh stated evenly.

"I'm glad he has you to look after him", Ursa said earnestly.

"I will always look after Zuko", Iroh vowed. "But having an uncle around is not the same as having your parents to care for you."

Ursa nodded. She still felt terrible, but she couldn't afford to dwell in self-pity. She had to be strong for her family.

"When you find Zuko, please tell him that I never stopped loving him."

Iroh had untied two ostrich-horses and was now preparing to leave.

"I can tell him that, but it is one thing to _say_ you love someone and another thing to _act_ accordingly."

Ursa didn't remember Iroh being this cold, but since she probably deserved the criticism, she just nodded.

"I have searched around the village thoroughly. I seriously doubt Zuko is still here, so there's no point for me to stay any longer. I will return to our ship", Iroh stated. "If Zuko comes back here, please tell him where I went."

"I will", Ursa promised, and added: "But you don't think he's coming back, do you?"

"No, I don't", Iroh stated. "Goodbye, Lady Ursa. I wish the best for you and your family."

Iroh's manners never failed him but it was clear to Ursa that the greeting was said solely out of politeness.

"Goodbye, Iroh."

ooo

I'm going to regret this.

Ilya was sneaking around the campsite the Militia had built amidst trees to cover it from sight. She could hear people sleeping inside a tent she was just rounding, and she moved very quietly as not to wake them.

Technically, she had every right to be walking there. Nonetheless, Ilya didn't want to run into anyone.

I can't believe I'm going to do this. I'm such a traitor.

Despite all her doubts, Ilya's mind was made.

I'm going to aid the Fire Nation. My family would so disown me, if they hadn't done that already. They'd hate me for this.

Even though Ilya's whole body shook with nervousness, she tried to focus. By concentrating on her bending, she could roughly tell if there were people walking near her location.

So far, no one.

Ilya had counted on Shen putting an end to the whole prisoner-fiasco when he had returned from his scouting trip, but he hadn't.

Shen had pulled Ilya aside and told her that the matter wasn't worth fighting for.

Ilya realized she was being followed.

She took a breath and tried to concentrate. Someone was closing in on her. Someone wearing soft leather boots.

Ilya waited a while, letting her follower catch up.

When Sokka emerged from behind a tree, Ilya had already composed herself enough to convincingly stare him down.

"Wow", Sokka exclaimed.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be resting", Ilya accused Sokka, as if it was he who had been caught up to no good.

She was almost whispering as not to wake anyone up.

"I... I just came to say that you... you shouldn't do this", Sokka, too, was whispering.

"Do what?" Ilya asked a bit too quickly.

Sokka sighed: "Look, I get it that you think you have to do something about the Fire Nation prisoner, but I'm telling you, this is not a good idea."

Okay, so he had figured it out.

"I know", Ilya sighed, "but I won't let them kill her, and you can't stop me."

"They're going to kill her?" Sokka asked, surprised, "What for?"

"On the record, because she's a Fire Nation spy. Off the record, because it's 'good for the morals'. Apparently we here in the Militia are so righteous we don't need a real reason to start executing people."

Good for the morals?

Ilya had been disgusted by Shen's words. And disappointed.

She'd always thought Shen would be ready to move mountains when it was the right thing to do. Turned out Shen only moved mountains for his people.

The Water Tribe boy gaped at Ilya before answering: "Well, uh, I can't believe I'm saying this but... then maybe you do have a point."

"I mean, Fire Nation is evil and all, but it still isn't... right to pin all their crimes on one woman just because she's conveniently available."

"I guess I'm just going to have to come with you."

"What? Absolutely no!" Ilya hissed, "It's my stupid plan, and I alone will go down with it. After I've ranted about this to everyone who's stood still long enough to hear me out, it's really unlikely people won't figure out it was me who broke her out. There's no need to get you into trouble for this as well."

"Yeah, but I owe you, so I'm not going to let you do this alone. What's the plan?"

"You're in no condition to help me. Also, if you do this, all of Militia will become not just your enemy but the Avatar's as well", Ilya tried to reason, "Is that a risk you're willing to take?"

Sokka thought for a moment, but eventually replied: "I'm sure Aang will forgive me for getting some dirt on his reputation because if he was here, he'd be right with you on this whole 'let's not kill anyone' thing. He's totally opposed to death penalty. He wouldn't want to kill the Fire Lord."

"So I'm coming along whether you like it or not. And by the way, I'm already in a much better condition, thank you very much. I can help."

Ilya felt guilty for getting Sokka into trouble, but she was also relieved by the boy's offer.

While planning her move, she had begun to question her own mental health. It was reassuring to hear she wasn't the only one who thought the situation was rotten.

"Fine. But you have to be quiet and do exactly as I tell you."

Sokka nodded and smiled: "So, the plan?"

They continued together towards the partially natural cave, partially bending made building, where the prisoner was being held.

ooo

Ari felt cold. She didn't usually envy benders and she sure as hell didn't think they were better warriors than non-benders, but in situations like this, firebending would've come in real handy.

Ari's hands and legs were tied with iron chain that was attached to the ground, so bending wouldn't have gotten her out of the situation, but at the very least she could've kept herself warm.

Ari was shivering, and not just because it was cold in the crude, rocky structure her captors had built for her imprisonment.

Years of elite training had taught her how to stay calm, rational and in control under battle circumstances. Her training had enabled her to appear quietly defiant throughout the ordeal of being taken prisoner and dragged to an enemy stronghold.

My fearless expression is my true war paint.

Ari wondered briefly if any of the actual, red war paint she'd put on her face that morning was still in place.

Probably not.

Now that she was alone she couldn't stop shaking in a way that had nothing to do with the cold.

I don't want to die.

Ari could hear muffled footsteps approaching the tent. The two guards sitting outside heard them as well.

"Who's out there?" one of them called.

"Relax", the other man said, "It's just Ilya."

The man who'd spoken first didn't seem to relax one bit: "What are you doing here, Ilya? And who's your friend?"

"Hey, Jing", a female voice greeted, "Sokka here is from the Water Tribes and he was curious to see how we here in the Earth Kingdom handle our Fire Nation prisoners."

"Apparently, the people of Water have had some pretty unsuccessful experiences with it themselves because their prisons and chains are made of _ice_."

Both guards and the girl laughed quietly while a young male voice tried to defend his people's customs: "... how were we supposed to know they would melt!"

"I don't know kiddo. Our orders were not to let _any_ extra people in", the first guard said, though he was obviously considering it.

"Come on", the other guard replied, "Isn't it our duty to our allies to show them how it's done?"

The other man must've agreed, since a moment later, two people walked into the room, closing the wooden door behind them.

The new arrivals were a girl wearing Earth Kingdom clothes and a boy in Water Tribe colors.

They were young, even younger than Ari herself, and she was only 21.

The kids exchanged glances, apparently trying to determine whether the men waiting outside would hear them.

Since the men themselves were making a loud conversation, the two kids started whispering to one another.

"_This_ is your great plan?" the boy asked, incredulous.

"What? I got us _in_, didn't I?" the girl answered.

"Yeah, but how are we going to get _out_ of here with those two waiting outside?"

"Well I didn't hear you suggesting a _better_ plan."

"You kidding me? How about you, being an earthbender an all, dig a secret tunnel to this _cave_, we take her and no one would even know we were here?"

"If _you_ can dig a secret tunnel then now would be a good time to do so", the girl rolled her eyes.

"What? Wait, are you saying you don't know how to do that? I thought making tunnels was earthbending one-o-one", the boy scratched his

head.

The girl sighed: "Well it isn't. Moving rocks is. Tunnels require more planning and power."

"I already told you girls aren't generally taught how to fight, and my family isn't so wealthy they could've sent me to an academy or get me a private teacher."

"I know how to clear a field of rocks or how to dig a ditch and stuff like that, but almost all the fighting moves I know I've learned after joining the Militia. I could try to dig a tunnel, but even if I succeeded, it would be loud. Someone would figure out something was out of place a lot faster than I could dig."

Ari tried to look tough, but she couldn't help beginning to get curious and even carefully optimistic.

Did he just say they are here to rescue me?

The boy nodded.

"Okay. So, back to your plan, what happens next?" the boy smiled encouragingly despite his obvious worry.

The girl smiled, lifted her wrist and pointed at a stone bracelet on it.

"There is one trick I know that most earthbenders don't. My grandmother, the only other bender in our family, taught it to me years ago. She wanted me to be able to protect myself."

As the girl spoke, she moved her fingers and a small but sharp stone spike formed, still attached to the bracelet.

It's a hidden knife disguised as jewelry, Ari thought.

"Great", the boy said, sounding less confident, "but since we don't want to kill her, how does that help?"

"Because this isn't just a weapon. I can shape it to fit the lock, making it a universal key. So, all we have to do now is to get her on board", the girl said and nodded towards Ari.

Both kids turned to look at her. Ari had no idea what game they were playing or if she could at all trust them, but she feared she had no choice but to go with them.

She had defiantly told her captors that her squad would come and rescue her but, in reality, her last assignment had been so poorly planned that she knew she had little hope of being rescued.

Ari's team was far from here and even if they would come looking for her, they would never get here in time.

Ari doubted the situation could get any worse, so she nodded.

ooo

"Run!" Sokka shouted, and pushed the Fire Nation woman on the back to emphasize his words.

Sokka could barely believe he was actually staging a prison break to _help_ the Fire Nation.

Now it was too late for second thoughts, though. The alarm had just been given and they would soon have the whole camp after them.

"Would've - never guessed - this morning - I'd be doing this â€" tonight", Sokka told Ilya, trying not to pant too heavily.

"Shut up â€" and run", the earthbender panted back, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

No matter how serious the situation gets, a little humor never hurts, Sokka thought to himself.

They had attempted to distract the guards and sneak out, but after that had failed, they had opted to running fast.

The Fire Nation woman wasn't a bender and had asked to be given something to protect herself with, but Sokka and Ilya had been less than enthusiastic about trusting an enemy with as much as a pocket knife, so that hadn't happened.

Now the soldier was running ahead of the bunch, followed closely by her saviors.

Good thing she wasn't wearing a standard Fire Nation uniform, Sokka thought to himself, _she'll run much faster in that light leather armor._

The night sky was beginning to clear as the trio was running through the forest. Sokka tried to look around himself for a possible hiding place.

We are moving fast but we can't run forever.

Before he had time to find anything promising, a rock wall shot up from the ground only a few meters ahead of them.

Sokka and Ilya managed to stop themselves before running into the wall, but the fire soldier wasn't as lucky. She got up pretty quickly, but their pursuers were now closing in on them.

I don't like these odds. I've got to think of something fast.

The trio started running to a new direction, but it, too, was soon blocked with earthbending.

The Fire Nation woman switched to offensive. In lack of better weapons, she picked a few rocks from the ground and was now throwing them with uncanny precision.

"Wow", was all Sokka could say.

"You think this is something... If I had a bow and enough arrows I could take all these guys down", the woman muttered under her breath,

more to herself than Sokka.

_Maybe, but then again we don't really want to _kill_ any of them , either._

Ilya, too, turned to scan their pursuers.

After apparently finding the person she was looking for, she threw three rocks with her bending towards him. The man, an older bender, blocked the rocks with an earth wall and retaliated with a precise spike to Ilya's side.

The hit came through, and Sokka could hear a bone snapping as it hit Ilya's right hand. The girl screamed out of pain and fell to the ground. Sokka run to her protection.

A ten or so guys had surrounded them. The Fire Nation woman and her rocks were the last thing keeping them away.

Now what? Sokka tried to frantically think of a way out. _Damn, I wish Aang, Katara and Appa were here._

Before Sokka had time to say anything, something bright and fast fell from the sky between the trio and their attackers. As it hit the ground, it exploded into a fiery blaze, lighting the entire scene in a moment.

What the...?

By the time Sokka's eyes had adjusted to the sudden change in light, a long, black creature had landed before them, standing on the scorched ground.

It coiled and curled and opened its mouth, letting out a fearsome growl that ended with a hiss.

Oh, spirits, now we're dead.

ooo

Zuko tried to look as big and menacing as he could.

He had immediately noticed the commotion on the ground, but had initially decided not to interfere since he didn't know who the people running were or what they had done.

After flying closer for a better look, he had noticed one of the people being pursued by an Earth Kingdom mob was a Yu Yan archer.

He'd thought they might all be Fire Nation, despite their clothes, but the earthbending had proven that presumption wrong.

The more Zuko learned of the situation, the less any of it made sense.

One of the runners even looked like Sokka, the guy traveling with the Avatar, and Zuko had no idea how that fitted into anything.

The only thing Zuko knew for sure was that the people running were in

desperate need of help, but no help was coming. No one but Zuko.

Zuko breathed fire, but more to get the men to back off than to try to take them down.

If he had to fight his way out of the situation, he wasn't sure what the outcome would be.

Young dragons weren't nearly as powerful as the old and mighty ones, and he was still trying to get used to his new situation, so the odds weren't on his side.

Good thing fighting wasn't his only option.

Zuko turned to look at the three shocked youngsters behind him.

He charged towards them and grabbed the Yu Yan in one front paw and the two teenagers in the other.

Zuko was a small dragon, but the kids weren't big themselves, so he was able to lift them all.

Before any of the benders had time to get wild ideas about trapping Zuko's paws to the ground, he opened his wings and took off.

The black dragon and his newfound captives disappeared into the darkness of the night.

()))()

****A/N****

I bet a lot of readers would've liked to learn more of Zuko's transformation in this chapter, but I can say that many of your questions will be answered in the next one.

I'll say this much on the topic: Zuko will turn in and out his dragon form, but he won't be able to do this at will. At least _not yet_.

This isn't a curse from a spirit, but a gift. Tuli wanted to protect Zuko in the best way she knew how, aka by giving him thick skin, claws and the ability to fly.

Tuli promised to be there for Zuko when he was _at his most vulnerable_. This is not an Avatar State that pops up every time Zuko gets into trouble. Tuli's definition of vulnerable was when Zuko _isn't_ sure what he's supposed to do, whose side he's supposed to be on or _(especially_) when he's not sure who he himself is supposed to be._

The trigger isn't physical or mental but emotional.

And just to clarify, Zuko and Tuli didn't merge or anything like that. They are still two separate entities with emotions and plans of their very own.

Also, Zuko won't be freaked out every time he turns into a dragon, mainly because, by definition, when he's upset enough to turn into a

dragon, the transformation is the least of his worries.

13. The Black Dragon

****13. The Black Dragon****

They are heavier than I thought.

Although he was fairly sure he could have kept going longer, Zuko decided to start looking for a place to land. If he really put his mind into it, he could have probably kept flying a lot longer, but he did not want to take his chances with so many guests onboard.

Zuko decided they were far enough from their pursuers, and landed in a small clearing next to a creek. He was a small enough dragon to land almost anywhere, but that was another thing that worked well in theory but that Zuko had not successfully figured out in practice yet.

_Flying is so... wiggly. How are you supposed to _not_ hit every tree on your path?_

Landing by itself provided a new challenge: how was he to make touchdown when he was carrying people in almost every paw? The answer to that dilemma was thankfully simple enough.

"Ouch!" the Water Tribe kid yelped as Zuko dropped him and his two companions before smoothly landing at the edge of the clearing.

Zuko knew he should have felt happy. He had gotten out of a bad situation unharmed and successfully carried people with him for the first time. All of this on his first day as a dragon.

Not bad.

However, instead of feeling happy, Zuko felt frustrated and even a bit paranoid.

After three years of searching, I finally decided to throw in the towel, and who is the first person I run into? A friend of the Avatar's. The airbender is probably not far behind.

Zuko glanced at the three humans he had rescued. Now that they were saved, he could leave and go back to minding his own business again. Just because destiny had a funny way of playing with Zuko did not mean he had to play along.

Zuko considered taking off, but eventually decided against it. The Avatar always saved people from impending doom and then just flew away like nothing had happened, but Zuko was not like that. Not even in his most obsessed mode.

Zuko was the type that worried, and with at least one of the three people injured, he did not feel quite right vanishing before he had made sure that they were actually okay and could get back to civilization without him.

_Then again, vanishing was not a problem for you when you left _Uncle_ behind_, a voice in Zuko's head reminded him. Although Zuko

had had his reasons for leaving so suddenly and for not returning, now those reasons felt like distant seconds to not knowing where Iroh was or how he was doing.

Zuko felt so conflicted and guilty about the way he had left Uncle behind that he almost took off to go back for him right then and there. Almost.

These people may no longer be in immediate danger, but they are in the middle of nowhere. I cannot leave yet. I just... can't.

Instead of leaving, Zuko took a few deliberately slow steps towards his unwilling guests.

ooo

Sokka was talking to Ilya in order to keep her calm and still while the Fire Nation woman, who had introduced herself as Ari, used one of the bandage-type garments rolled around her arm to create a makeshift support for Ilya's broken arm.

As much as Sokka tried to sound calm and optimistic when talking to the earthbender, he could not stop himself from glancing over his shoulder from time to time to make sure that their newly found savior was keeping his distance.

Yep, still there. Tossing his head in an irritated and inhuman way. Great.

Sokka guessed Ari, too, was helping him and Ilya so eagerly partially because they had saved her, but also to have something else to do than wonder when they would all get eaten.

"There", Ari eventually said. "That should hold it for now. She should have a healer take a look at it as soon as possible, though. My knowledge of first aid is nowhere near on the level of a practiced healer."

Ilya nodded. She was probably in tremendous pain, but at least she was conscious.

And we are all alive, sort of thanks to a... Sokka could not quite finish the thought.

Now that they had dealt with the problem they had means to take care of, they all knew it was time to take a look at the gigantic, fire-breathing problem still hovering at the back of the clearing.

Sokka whispered to Ari: "Okay. That is what I think it is, right?"

"If what you are thinking is a dragon, then yes, I believe you're right", Ari answered evenly, her eyes never leaving the black creature.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Sokka asked.

Ari turned to look at Sokka. "What makes you think I know?"

Sokka rolled his eyes. "Because you are from Fire Nation. Duh."

Sokka looked to Ilya for support. The earthbender was on the same page with him. "I heard... somewhere... that dragons are connected to fire, so it is more likely to be here for you than for us." She had to speak between gasping breaths.

That is not a good sign, Sokka thought, and made a mental note to keep an eye on Ilya's level of awareness.

Ari looked annoyed. "You have got to be kidding me. Just because I am from Fire Nation does not mean I have any idea what to do when meeting a dragon! Why should I? They're supposed to be extinct!"

"Look, no need to get all rallied up here. I was just trying to... Wait. Do you mean extinct as in airbenders level of extinct, or just really rare kind of extinct?" Sokka asked.

"I mean extinct as in no one has seen a living dragon in my life time extinct."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Trust me, I am more surprised than anyone that dragons still exist, and I cannot begin to guess why one is living this far from the Fire Nation, or would come to our rescue."

The three youngsters looked simultaneously at the dragon again. He had his right side turned towards them, but his amber eyes were watching their every move closely.

The dragon's body was long and sleek. His skin and mane were dark as night, creating a very effective camouflage at this time of day. Sokka thought he could also see hints of gold here and there, creating a delicate pattern on the dragon's scaly skin.

The creature was not as big as Sokka had thought on the first glimpse. Without any reference point, it was hard to be sure, but suddenly Sokka had the odd feeling that the dragon actually looked a bit round-headed and almost cute, like a... cub?

"Ari, this is probably nonsense but, just to be sure, this is a full-grown dragon, right?"

"I am still no dragon expert, but if the stories I have heard have any truth to them, my guess would be no."

"What are you saying?" Ilya asked, sounding more excited than worried. "Surely, something that big has to be full-grown."

Ari sighed. "I have never seen a dragon before or met anyone who has, but the legends that describe the old, mighty dragons, say they could gulp a komodo-rhino in one bite. Also, full-grown dragons in pictures have four tusks and a big mane. This one has only two tusks and he has no mane around his snout."

Sokka looked at the dragon again, trying to compare it in his mind to the beast Ari had just described, and shivered.

"Okay", Sokka still needed more information to go on. "Since you obviously know more about dragons than the two of us put together, you wouldn't happen to know any legends about how to treat mysterious, young dragons who have unexpectedly come to your aid?"

"Off hand? With respect", Ari said, although she did not sound too convinced herself. "Honor and respect are kind of important to our culture."

Something caught Sokka's eye in the way the dragon looked at them. Earlier it had seemed dangerous and irritated, but for a brief moment it appeared almost... amused.

Ari went on: "I do not know if this is of any help, but I can tell you that there is something unusual about this particular dragon."

"Maybe you should have started with that then, aye?" Ilya tried to lighten the mood, but the pain in her voice rendered the good intention useless.

Ari glanced at the Earth Kingdom girl, but instead of irritation, there was guilt in her eyes.

She feels bad about what happened to Ilya. Odd. That is not at all what I would have expected of a Fire Nation soldier.

"Well?" Ilya continued the conversation as if there had been no pause. "What is the big secret you forgot to tell us?"

Ari shook her head. "It is not a secret, just another legend, but my grandfather always told me to beware of black dragons."

"Okay, that does sound important", Sokka allowed. "He didn't happen to specify what the skin color has to do with how dangerous a dragon is? I mean, why not the size of its claws or the heat of its flame or something?"

"He said children of Agni are not supposed to be the color of night, and that seeing a black dragon is an unlucky omen."

"Seriously? Are we really down to bad omens already?" Ilya asked.

"I said it was probably nothing, but you asked to hear everything I have ever learned of dragons, and since that does not happen to be much, then yes, we are down to superstitious nonsense. To be honest, I doubt the color makes any damn difference to how dangerous a dragon is. I would guess that black dragons are just really rare. I mean, they were probably rare even before all dragons became extinct."

The dragon was still looking at them keenly. Even on land he appeared to be constantly in motion, his body slowly turning from one side to the other as he breathed or changed position. When you combined the eerie, inhuman way of moving with the unblinking stare, the outcome was pretty unnerving.

Still, if Sokka would not have known better, he would have thought some of the dragon's gestures and expressions were almost human.

However, despite the obvious curiosity he showed for them and their conversation, the dragon did not approach.

Timid, was not exactly the first word that came to mind when looking at a dragon, but Sokka still felt like the creature was holding back. For a brief moment he even wondered if it was because he understood how scared they were.

Wait. It couldn't possibly understand speech? Right?

But now that Sokka had thought about it, he had to know. "How smart are dragons?"

Ari looked thoughtful. "According to legends, dragons were the original firebenders, and they taught the first human firebenders how to bend their element. If that is even partially true, then they are very smart."

As Sokka weighed Ari's words in his head, he suddenly understood what it was about the situation that kept making him feel uneasy. Well, uneasier than usually when facing a monster.

Dragons are firebenders. Firebenders can read minds.

No... It couldn't be. I mean, Aang is convinced Appa understands speech and I guess it is possible that dragons do, too, but mindreading?

Sokka looked at the black dragon with new eyes. If he had heard what he had just thought, he had a good poker face. Nonetheless, the dragon was still hovering around, waiting for something to happen, and he did look awfully lot like he was following their conversation...

Sokka tried to remember what all he had been thinking since meeting the dragon. Just in case.

He could ask Ari about the matter, but taking into consideration the kind of reaction they had gotten from Shyu, he seriously doubted the woman knew the answer better. None of them did. The only one in the clearing who might have the answer was the dragon himself.

_Okay, if my theory is completely wrong, I am going to feel pretty stupid in a few moments. Then again, that is nothing new. I guess it is still worth a try to ask from the one here who should know _most_ about dragons._

"Um, hi there, Dragon", Sokka struggled to find the right words. "Thanks for saving us and all that. You wouldn't by any chance happen to understand what we're saying?"

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Zuko had not expected this. Although it was pretty stupid of people to presume dragons were dumb animals, people were often exactly that stupid. He would have wanted to know what had led the Water Tribe boy of them all to this conclusion.

This is Sokka's first time out of his village. What does he know of anything?

Zuko had first been surprised and even a bit offended when he had realized that he was being left out of the conversation. Eventually, Zuko had decided that the fact that the trio did not realize he was listening in was an unexpected bonus. This way, Zuko could learn what was going on without having to spy on anyone, and he wasn't expected to answer any questions himself.

Now Zuko felt torn. If he nodded and tried to communicate with the humans, he would have more say in the direction of the conversation. Perhaps he could even ask direct questions. However, there was a certain risk in revealing just how much he knew and understood. If he played a dumb animal instead, they might keep underestimating him.

The only way Zuko could directly communicate with the humans right now, and thus maybe gain something from telling them that he understood speech, was if he used the Power of Dragons. Sure, he could try something elaborate like drawing characters in the sand, but he seriously doubted that would be efficient or would even work. Or if the youngsters knew how to read.

One of the problems with using the Power was that Zuko was still pretty new to this whole dragon thing, and he did not want to accidentally reveal more about himself than was absolutely necessary. It might be easier to use the Power now that he was a dragon, but Zuko could not bet on it.

Another problem was the proximity that using the ability required. Zuko was not a trusting person by nature, and he was uncomfortable with the concept of letting these strangers close enough to touch him. Despite the fact that Zuko could have probably taken them all down even in his human form, let alone as a dragon, he did not feel safe around them.

As a child, Zuko had enjoyed human contact, but after the Agni Kai, he had begun to pull away from everyone. Now that he was a dragon, having to touch a strange human sounded even less appealing.

However, there were enough misconceptions about dragons going around as it was. Zuko did not feel like adding to them.

Zuko turned his head fully towards the humans, painfully aware that they might notice his scar, although it was considerably less prominent on his black dragon skin than it had been on his human face. Sokka, who had been about to say something else, closed his mouth, waiting in anticipation.

Zuko closed his eyes briefly and nodded his head. The three teenagers gaped at him.

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"That could be just a coincidence, right?" Sokka asked, but even before he had finished the sentence the dragon huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Or not", Sokka finished.

Oh, man. Why do I always have to be right?

Sokka exchanged a look with Ilya and Ari. Undoubtedly they, too, were shuffling through the previous conversation in their memories, checking how they had behaved.

"Okay. Dragon. Um."

What do you say to a dragon?

Ari elbowed Sokka, who in turn gestured for her to say something if she thought he was doing it wrong. Ari rolled her eyes, but did as he had suggested. "Mighty dragon. We respectfully thank you for saving us. Is there something you wish us to do for you in return?"

The dragon shifted his weight, apparently weighing his answer. Eventually, the creature settled for shaking his head, declining their offer.

"What do you want?" Ilya said from the ground, sounding almost challenging. "Why are you still here?"

The dragon stared at Ilya. Or, more exactly, at her arm.

"Wait a second. Are you... concerned for our well-being?" Sokka guessed.

It sounded pretty farfetched, but then again, nothing about the situation was exactly conventional. _Viva la international cooperation?_

The black dragon went back to hovering around, making no obvious gestures that Sokka could make out.

"Are you alright?" Ari suddenly asked. Sokka turned to look at her, and realized that the question had not been addressed to the dragon but to Ilya.

Ilya opened her mouth to respond, but no voice came out. For a moment, a flash of pain crossed her face, and then, without a warning, she was unconscious.

"Ilya!" Sokka kneeled down next to her, Ari in tow. Sokka shook Ilya by the shoulder of her healthy arm, calling her name and telling her to wake up.

"She was fine a minute ago!" Sokka could not understand how this had happened.

"She might have other injuries that we overlooked", Ari speculated while trying Ilya's pulse. "If there are internal injuries, we are out of my depths. We have better get her to a healer. Now."

"Oh man. I wish Appa was here!" Sokka exclaimed, only now truly appreciating the freedom that came with traveling on a flying bison.

"I do not know who Appa is, but unless he is a healer, I doubt he could help us", Ari responded solemnly. "Ilya is Militia, right?"

Sokka nodded, not sure why that mattered right now.

"That is not good. We will be hard-pressed to find people who are willing to assist someone from the Militia, and her own people are the ones who did this to her, so we cannot exactly count on their help, either."

Sokka tried to think fast. "Well, we don't have to tell people she is from the Militia. All we have to do is take the stupid wristband off. Our biggest concern is to get her to safety. I mean, we have got to be close to a town, right? There is always a town nearby in Earth Kingdom. You know, in some direction."

Ari turned her attention from their patient to Sokka. "I am not from around. I do not know the mapping of the surrounding areas. Not by heart."

Something brushed against Sokka's left arm. First he thought it was just a blade of grass, but when he glanced to see what it was, he realized it was definitely something bigger than a blade of grass.

"Yikes!" He gulped and jumped to his feet, away from the dragon's whisker.

How could something that big move so quietly?! Not cool.

Ari, too, was on her feet. She had even grabbed another shard of stone in her hand and took a fighting stance.

The dragon, however, did not back down. He was staring at them almost defiantly.

Things that can fly are so creepy, Sokka decided. Then again, hadn't he just asked for a flying creature to come to their aid...?

"You. You can fly. You can take her to safety", Sokka stated before thinking the thought over.

"We cannot trust him", Ari said.

"Yeah, I know. I can't exactly trust you either, but what choice do we have?" Sokka pointed out.

The dragon turned his head in irritation, obviously wishing to convey something but having no means to do so.

"What are you trying to say?"

Abruptly, two of the creature's tentacle-like whiskers reached out to touch Sokka and Ari's heads. Before Sokka had time to put up a fight, he was no longer at the clearing in the dark woods.

Sokka was standing in the middle of a stone-paved courtyard surrounded by high walls. He looked around himself. All the colors were so bright that they made it hard to see clearly. The edges of the yard were blurry and shifted ever so slightly in the wind. Behind him was a stone building built against a hill, and as far Sokka could

tell, the construction was old.

The next thing he knew, Sokka was inside, flying swiftly over a few corridors, stopping inside a room that had a hot fireplace in the corner and that smelled of herbs. _A healer's office._

Sokka had never been to this place before, but something about it, in fact everything about it, was telling him _safety_.

Sokka snapped out of it, the surprise of being once again earthbound causing him to fall to his knees. He absently noted that Ari, too, looked utterly dazed, though she was still on her feet.

"What â€" was â€" _that_?" the Fire Nation soldier exclaimed.

Guessing she had been given a similar treatment, Sokka responded: "Dragons can show people their thoughts." _At least according to Aang, Roku's dragon had been able to do something a lot like that._

Ari turned to stare at Sokka. "But that is... that's... how do you know that?"

"It is a bit of a long story. I have just been told that they might be able to do that", Sokka sighed, not adding that showing memories may not be the only creepy talent dragons possessed. There was no point to speculate on things that couldn't, for the time being, be helped.

"That place", Sokka realized, talking to the dragon now. "It is close, right?"

The dragon nodded, and Sokka continued: "It is safe, and it has a healer. You want to take Ilya there."

He had meant it as a question, but it came out as a statement. To his mild horror, Sokka realized he knew exactly what the dragon's plan was. He just did not know if he could trust the dragon to keep his word.

The dragon moved his head, staring at Sokka with his burning golden eyes from an uncomfortably close distance. Sokka held his breath.

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Moving too smoothly for his size, the dragon half jumped half flew past Ari and Sokka, now holding his head next to Ilya's. Ari hated the way the dragon could move so unpredictably. As a Yu Yan, she had a lot of experience in hunting things, and still even she had a hard time keeping up with this being.

Ari realized that having a conversation about what would happen next was a formality. If the dragon really wanted to take the odd Militia girl, there was nothing she or the Water Tribe boy could do to stop him.

"I am coming along", Ari stated, already half-regretting the words as they came out of her mouth.

What am I saying? I cannot go awol just to make sure an enemy fighter is safe and sound. The protocol demands I report to the nearest Fire Nation outpost asap.

What would my squad say if I were seen aiding an enemy?

Sokka gaped at Ari and began to say something, but Ari was not focused on the boy. Her eyes were on the dragon, who met the gaze steadily before shaking his head.

Ari took a step forward. The dragon tensed and growled a low growl, warning her to keep a distance.

Someone's hand was on Ari's shoulder, trying to pull her back. Acting on reflex she grabbed the arm and pushed it away.

Sokka mumbled something about ungrateful Fire Nation scum. Ari spared a glance to make sure the boy was okay, but that was a mistake. The moment her focus faltered from the dragon, a tentacle was on her face again.

The message was short and had no words, but it was still an unmistakable no. But more like an 'I cannot take you with me' than an 'I won't take you with me'.

The dragon pulled back. Although it had 'said' nothing of the sorts, Ari got the feeling that the dragon was a bit afraid of her.

Afraid of me? A weak little human?

Then again, it were the 'weak little humans' who wiped out almost all of dragonkind, Ari realized. _Maybe he should be afraid of me. Maybe I shouldn't know where his lair is._

"What did he say?" Sokka asked.

"He said no."

"Should I go then?" the boy continued, sounding earnestly worried.

"No", Ari stated. "Secret sanctuaries need to stay that way. Stay hidden. We are just going to have to take a leap of faith here."

For a moment, there was a burning flicker in the dragon's eyes. _Was it... impressed?_

Ari nodded at the dragon, hoping they had reached an understanding.

In one graceful movement, the dragon grabbed Ilya, spread his wings and flew into the darkness of the early morning.

For a moment, all Ari could do was stare up into the sky. Ever since the day she had been ambushed and captured by the Earth Kingdom Militia, her life had been getting more and more surreal.

"Um. I kind of need to get going, but, I mean, do you have a place to go to or something?"

Ari turned to look at the Water Tribe kid. What was with everyone trying to rescue her tonight? She was beginning to feel like a real damsel.

She put on her tough, unreadable face before responding: "I'll be fine."

Ari could tell from the stars which way she needed to go. But there was still one more thing she had to say before leaving.

"I do not know why you saved me tonight, but you did. I owe you. You and that crazy eartbender and that dragon", Ari stated before vanishing into the darkness, leaving the boy alone in the clearing.

ooo

Zuko had once sworn to himself that he would never return to the Order of Shadows. Then again, he was doing many things tonight that he had never expected to do, period.

Zuko had always had a keen sense of direction, but after his transformation, finding his way had become almost instinctual. Therefore he knew the monastery wasn't far. He also knew that if he intended to find a place that would welcome in a dragon and an Earth Kingdom misfit, the list of possibilities wasn't a long one.

At least they know how to keep a secret.

()()()

A/N

Today, it has been exactly one month since I posted my first chapter of Dragon at Heart.

14. Lonely

****14. Lonely****

Zuko was soaring over snowcapped mountains and green valleys. His keen eyes could distinguish great many details even from this distance. A predatory instinct focused Zuko's attention to all sudden movements; making him constantly notice suitable prey.

Zuko knew the sun would rise soon. An ancient knowing told him so. Also, the morning mist was beginning to form with clouds of moist swirling all around him.

Zuko had a destination but he did not have a plan. His actions were based on the hope that the Order would take kindly to a dragon, but he had no guarantee. Since there was not much else he could do in the way of taking precautions, he decided to at least approach the place carefully.

Uncle would have been very disappointed in him. The old man always scolded Zuko when he acted before thinking or devising a proper plan. But perhaps even Uncle would have agreed that the highly unusual and

time-sensitive situation called for swift action.

In his paws Zuko was carrying the worryingly limb body of a young earthbender. He tried to hold her gently so as not to cause any extra damage. Zuko did not know what exactly was wrong with Ilya, but moving her like this probably did her no favors.

Zuko did not know much about the girl, but the little he had learned from Sokka's and Ari's conversation had told him she was responsible for saving an enemy soldier for the sake of doing what she thought was the right thing.

Weird and treasonous, yet oddly honorable all at once. _I guess if one of my crew helped an enemy of mine like the Avatar to escape, I would be furious, but even then it would depend on the circumstances. More importantly, Ilya is just a kid, and kids do and say rash and stupid things. _

So what if she screwed up this time? She should not have to pay for it for the rest of her life.

In the end, there weren't enough people who stood up for what they believed in these days, and Zuko was not about to let one quite literally die in his arms.

As Zuko scaled one last hilltop, the monastery came into view. A less educated eye would not have been able to tell there was a building there at all, but Zuko had the advantage of knowing where to look.

He flew a little higher, letting a thin cloud cover him from possible spectators. It was most likely an unnecessary precaution. Odds were no one was watching up, and even if someone was, they probably could not see a black dragon against the still dark sky. Nonetheless, Zuko could always breathe a bit easier knowing he was in a sound hiding place.

Zuko could tell there were two guards at their usual posts on the monastery's wall. They would have been invisible to anyone on the ground level, but from a bird perspective, Zuko had no trouble seeing them hiding atop the wall.

Zuko circled around one more time to make sure there were no other beings on the monastery's grounds. He would have preferred to have more time to study his surroundings, but as an experienced infiltrator Zuko knew that in every mission there came a time when the only way to precede was by taking a small leap of faith.

Zuko swooped into motion. Following a cold wind current heading down the mountainside, he rushed down. He was moving so close to the rocky cliffs of the mountain that he needed to serpent around few tall trees to avoid hitting them.

In mere seconds Zuko was close enough to catch the guards' scent. Soundlessly, he landed on three paws, steadying his claws on a mountainside that would have been too steep for a human to climb. Well, at least too steep for any reasonable human being to climb on; Zuko himself had been just crazy enough to enter the monastery from this direction the first time he had broken in there.

Listening intently, Zuko was relatively sure that he could even make out the guards' breathing. Slowly, he reopened his wings, and let the wind float him further. down As the monastery came back to view behind the vegetation, Zuko saw that the guards were still oblivious to his presence, each huddled in their own hiding place on opposite sides of the wall.

In one leap, Zuko closed the distance between himself and the guard closer to him, landing only a few meters behind the young man. Immediately the guard's pose straightened and every hair on his back stood up. He swirled around, a look of utter shock forming on his face when he realized what he was facing.

Now that Zuko was close enough to really see the guards face he was sure it was no one he knew. The man was young, probably only a few years older than Zuko, so he was probably still an apprentice. The man opened his mouth to call for help, or quite possibly to scream, but before he could make a sound, Zuko's whisker was on the man's forehead.

_'Be calm. Not an attack, _Zuko communicated to the frightened man, causing him to freeze in place. _A friend. Need help. Get Master Kurita. Now.'_

The man was in awe but still too afraid to move, so Zuko decided to nudge him with a friendly memory. For a brief moment, he showed the man an image of a sun-warmed pond in the middle of a still clearing; it was a place Uncle had taken him to meditate in one time. It was the calmest thing he could think of that would not be too recognizable to give anything away about his identity.

That random image seemed to snap the man out of his terror: "But... it is impossible..."

_'Master Kurita. Now', _Zuko commanded.

The man nodded.

"Hey!" the other guard yelled from some distance away, finally having noticed Zuko's silhouette against the gray morning light. The older man whistled a high-pitched warning.

This was to be expected, but it still made Zuko anxious to be out in the open. He broke the connection to the younger guard. It was not this young apprentice that Zuko needed to convince to take Ilya in.

Admirably swiftly, a group of Order people emerged from different entries, ready to defend their little sanctuary, come what may. Most of them halted in place upon seeing what they were up against.

"Um, it is okay", the guard Zuko had communicated with managed to say. "He is a friend."

Zuko was still unwilling to let go of Ilya, in case he would have to make a quick escape after all. He peered at the newly-formed crowd on the yard, looking for people who may be useful to him. Feeling surrounded and outnumbered, Zuko was constantly resisting the urge to growl and open his wings in order to look bigger and badder. Still, he knew he mustn't. It would sent the wrong signal.

Finally, Zuko saw Master Kurita enter the small courtyard. The guard standing next to Zuko noticed it, too. "Master Kurita! This, um, dragon wants to have a word with you."

Zuko weighed his options. He could fly over to Kurita, but that would mean he would have to give up his position. On the other hand, he did not have the patience to wait for the master to climb up to the wall. Slowly, so as not to alarm anyone, Zuko spread his wings.

He made eye-contact with Kurita to see if his gesture had been understood. To Zuko's relief, Kurita nodded to him, and then commanded his men to make space for their guest to land. Some of the Order people looked like they disagreed, but they all complied.

Zuko flew down and landed in front of Kurita. Not wasting time, he formed a connection between their minds. It was easier than he had anticipated, but Zuko was still nervous. He did not wish to reveal who he really was, so he focused his mind to dominate the conversation.

Zuko showed Kurita a short story piled together from his own, Sokka and Ari's memories. In a flash he showed how Ilya had saved a Yu Yan and had been injured fighting her own people. Zuko lowered the earthbender down before Kurita and finished his 'story' with the intent of saying: _Help. Please._

Zuko broke away as soon as the message was across.

Kurita looked surprised. He probably wasn't used to being dismissed like this. Still, he recovered swiftly, bowing his head deep in respect, saying: "I am Master Kurita, and this is the Order of Shadows. You are welcome here, unnamed dragon, and so is this girl you have pleaded sanctuary for."

Zuko stared at Kurita. The man looked older and more fragile than he had remembered, but his eyes were still every bit as sharp as before. Zuko did not doubt his word. He lowered the girl to the ground between himself and the master.

Zuko lowered his head a little, forming something he hoped looked like a dragon version of a bow. Then, without a warning, he opened his wings and took to the sky.

On his way to the monastery, Zuko had briefly considered staying there himself, but now that he was actually here, he knew that this was not the place for him. It wasn't just the things Kurita had said the last time they had met that had made him leave the first time.

These people have chosen to dedicate their lives to preserving ancient knowledge. I can respect them for it, but it is not the same as belonging with them. I am no longer sure what kind of life I would choose for myself if I could have things my way, but I know this isn't it.

Not even close.

Only now that there were no immediate threats or ground-breaking revelations to keep his mind occupied, Zuko realized how tired he

was. He had not rested since... since.

Zuko was afraid to stop and rest; afraid to be left alone with his own thoughts. If he would stop to listen to them, he'd have to face the reality of his situation.

Zuko had no idea what to do next.

So long as Zuko had a plan, even a desperate plan like finding and capturing the Avatar, he could find the strength within him to keep going. Even after Zuko had been banished and his personal world had ended, the Prince had been able to bear it by focusing his energy on rectifying his circumstance. But now he did not have a plan, not even a short-term plan, not even a bad plan, and Zuko felt tired.

Ursa did not want him. Zuko felt numb. Too tired and lost for the pain to reach him.

He was hollow; in pieces with a few of the pieces missing. But it was easier this way. Easier to breathe and think while being out of touch with his old life.

Ozai had considered killing Zuko, but Zuko was certain his father would not have gone through with it. Not unless Zuko had deserved it, and if that had been the case, it would have been Zuko's fault.

Ozai had banished Ursa. Their family had been shattered because of... because of Zuko.

Ursa had murdered Azulon.

It appeared that things Zuko had taken for granted had grumbled down like a house that had been built on a poor foundation.

_My family is built on lies. _

But now his mind felt clearer. Cold and numb, but clear.

Zuko's mother had killed his grandfather, the Fire Lord, and it, too, was Zuko's fault. Or maybe it wasn't, Zuko wasn't sure anymore, but at least Zuko would be the one get punished for it.

How could Uncle ever forgive him? Zuko was responsible for the death of his father.

All this time, Iroh had been there for Zuko. Uncle would worry for Zuko, Zuko knew as much, but he wasn't sure if he had it in him to face Iroh after all he had learned.

I have been holding him back all these years. Uncle deserves better.

None of this was Iroh's fault. He did not _deserve_ any of it. He deserved to have the peaceful retirement years he always spoke of.

Iroh would mourn Zuko, but he would get over it. He would be better off without him.

Zuko saw a clearing in the forest below him. He had been flying

forward without paying attention to his surroundings. Now he was too tired to keep flying so he landed.

Zuko curled on himself.

I could still capture the Avatar.

If Zuko regained his honor, he could return to the Fire Nation and become the prince he had been born to be. In fact, if he had not been in such a hurry earlier to take Ilya to a healer, he could have followed the Water Tribe boy straight to the Avatar's location. Somehow, though, Zuko wasn't sure if that was what he should do.

A cloud of doubts filled his mind. He tried to shake it off but no clarity came.

Zuko wasn't sure if he should capture the Avatar anymore, or even if there ever was a time he should have. The airbender was nothing like the scary and bitter man Zuko had expected to find. He was far from harmless but he was... a kid.

Looking back on it, Zuko realized that he had had doubts about his mission for quite some time now. Possible since the moment he had first seen Aang through Katara's eyes.

That could be the reason why Zuko had not tried as hard as he could have to capture the airbender so far, and why he had let himself get distracted from his quest so easily. Zuko had just been too stubborn to admit his doubts even to himself before now.

It was ridiculous to think this way. Think that he knew better than all the Fire Lords before him. Not to mention treasonous.

The Avatar was and would always remain a great and very real threat to his nation and it was Zuko's duty to his people to eliminate that threat. There was no other way.

And still.

Thankfully Zuko was so tired that he was able to doze off despite the rising sun. It would be easier to just sleep. There was no way his nightmares could compare with the nightmare that was the reality.

Ooo

"I'm so bored", Toph said to no one in particular. Not like she had anyone to talk to.

She kicked a little boulder, causing it to fly across the cave.

Toph knew she shouldn't complain. She had, after all, been able to escape her golden cage for a day. That was something to be grateful for. It had lately become harder and harder to find ways to ditch her useless earthbending teacher and get the opportunity to run off to the caves to study some actual earthbending.

The Earth Rumble was only a month away, and she should have been making the most of this chance. Instead, it all felt... pointless.

Toph knew she was the greatest earthbender in the world. And it wasn't just that she thought she was the greatest. She really was, certifiably; she had her six Earth Rumble championships to prove that. So she knew it, but what was the point when _no one else did?_

_Why can't my parents see it? Why can't they see _me?_

For a moment, Toph felt like crying, but luckily that made her angry. Anger was better than sadness. Sadness was useless, not to mention pathetic. She was _not_ _one of those stupid girly girls that _cried_.

Toph kicked another unsuspecting boulder, crushing it to dust. She crossed her arms defiantly. Not that there was anyone to see the gesture here in these caves. No one came here, no one but her and the badger-moles, and they were all blind.

Even if someone had gotten lost and ended up down in the caves, Toph would have known about. Down here, she was the one who could see.

Toph kept walking, not heading to anywhere in particular. She had excavated these caves in depth in her childhood. This was where she had first met the badger-moles and where her new life of seeing had begun. But as Toph had grown older, her parents had begun keeping an even tighter watch over her, and she couldn't remember when had been the last time she had had the time or the energy to wander this deep into the cave system.

I must be miles away from Gaoling by now, she thought to herself. _Good. Maybe I'll just keep walking and never go back there._

But Toph knew she wouldn't do that. She couldn't. They were her parents, no matter how dorky they sometimes were, and she was their only child. Their precious, lonely doll. And she was bored.

Toph stopped. She could see... something.

First she thought that a badger-mole had stopped to rest in a cave above her. Focusing on the weight, Toph could tell that it was no badger-mole. But it was something big. And something alive.

A komodo-rhino? No, the shape is all wrong.

Toph focused even harder, trying to build an image of the creature, but it kept eluding her.

What had begun as mild curiosity was now turning into annoyance. It was like this thing was purposefully toying with her, mocking her blindness, and proving her inadequate.

What are you?

The creature was not in one of the caves but on the surface. It wasn't moving, but it was definitely breathing.

Going to the surface was a bad idea. Of course she was more than able to take care of herself, but someone might see her.

For a moment Toph was torn between heading back home and going up to surface in the hopes of getting a better look at the unidentified being. She had already taken a step towards home when it hit her that running away from a possible fight was cowardice. And she was not a coward.

Instead Toph began digging a tunnel towards the creature's resting place.

Ooo

Zuko had never been a deep sleeper, a fact that had apparently not changed upon him turning into a dragon. He wasn't sure how long he had been asleep, but looking at the sun, he guessed it was about midday.

A quiet sound had woken him. Now Zuko was wide awake.

Zuko stayed very still, not wanting to let his potential attackers to know he was onto them. Instead he listened intently, attempting to identify the direction and the source of the sound that had caught his attention.

There. Something brushing against the grass.

In a flash Zuko was up on his feet, ready to fight, flashing his teeth and growling.

To his great surprise, the source of the sound wasn't a horde of attackers. It was a tiny girl.

The girl yelped. Zuko didn't know how to react.

Suddenly, the girl waved her arms in a kata, which caused a massive amount of earth beneath Zuko's feet to spike up, tying him in place.

As if tying a dragon would make it considerably less dangerous.

Zuko reprimanded himself for underestimating a person just because she looked like a cute little girl. Azula was a cute little girl, too, but that did not mean she wasn't lethal. This earthbender was clearly a kindred spirit.

Hating feeling so vulnerable, Zuko opened his mouth and huffed waves of fire at his feet, causing the earth to dry up, weaken and, in places, even explode off his paws.

Zuko turned his focus on the girl again. She had raised a wall of earth to protect herself from pieces of rock. Zuko growled a deep growl to let her know she should not mess with him. He was so not in the mood for this.

Before Zuko could do anything, the girl attacked again. This time she used an ostrich-horse-sized boulder that she assembled out of nowhere. She threw it at Zuko with such speed that it hit home.

Zuko hissed in pain as the rock hit his left elbow and lower neck

with crushing precision. Blinded by anger, Zuko shook off the pain, and in one quick wave of his wings, rose to the sky.

He circled the girl, keeping a distance from the element that would bring him pain. Zuko vaguely realized that he had the option of just simply flying away, but it wasn't in his nature to turn down a fight. A part of him was starting to enjoy this.

For a moment the girl seemed to have frozen in place. Then she lifted her hands to cover her head, the gesture created a shield of earth over her.

Zuko dived in the air and whiplashed his tail to hit the rocky structure, the ferocity of the movement shattering the haphazardly put-together shield. Before the girl had time to get her game together, Zuko landed on top of her, grasped her in his claws and shot back up to the sky.

The key to fighting dragons was getting them down with the first hit. If you didn't, all you had accomplished was making a dragon angry. A mistake she was now paying for.

The key to fighting earthbenders was separating them from their element. A weakness Zuko intended to make the most of.

Zuko flew higher and higher, adrenaline still coursing through his veins. He noticed absently that his captive wasn't even attempting to struggle. On the contrary: she was holding on to Zuko's paw for dear life.

For the first time Zuko really looked at the girl, and noticed that there was something odd about her eyes. They were milky white.

She is blind, Zuko numbly realized. _I have just abused and kidnapped a blind little girl._

Suddenly feeling horrible about his actions, Zuko struggled to think of a way to make things right. Unable to think of a better solution, Zuko created a mental connection with the girl.

Hush, little one. Don't cry! I won't hurt you. I won't let you fall.

The girl's unseeing eyes widened in surprise. '_You... you can speak?_'

Yes. Don't cry. Everything will be alright, _Zuko assured.

I am... I'm not crying, _the girl, Toph, sniffed. '_Just get me down, will you?_'

Zuko mentally agreed, suddenly understanding the extent of the girl's discomfort; she was up in the air but could not see anything around her.

Zuko landed softly back on the same clearing they had left from. Toph was still very afraid, close to hyperventilation, and it was all Zuko's fault. He had been too absorbed in his own pain and fear to realize how she must have felt having to suddenly fight a dragon.

'Are you injured?' Zuko insisted to know. He tried to find the answer from Toph's mind, but it was hard to read, because her mind was in such a state of frenzy and also because her memories were very different from other people's memories, which were almost always in the form of images.

Back on the ground, Toph's heartbeat began to even. Her element was a great comfort and a source of power for her, and even a means to see. Zuko had never experienced anything like that, but Toph, too, was blown away.

'You... when you show me these things I... I can see! You know, like regular people. I think.'

Zuko had added calming imagery to go with the words without thinking much about it. To Toph, this was the first time she could see things the way other people saw them.

'Do it again!'

 Toph insisted.

Zuko concluded that at least Toph did not appear to be in pain, and so he decided to amuse her. He showed Toph the clearing they were currently on, causing her to gasp in awe.

Being nice to her was the least Zuko could do after having hurt her in his unthinkingness. Also, Zuko could not help but to feel sorry for Toph, who was blown away by such simple things as the concepts of color and sunlight. How awful it would be to be deprived of the ability to see, a gift most took for granted.

Zuko, on the other hand, did not take the ability of seeing as a given. Not after his own eye had been damaged in the Agni Kai.

The healers had told him there was a chance he would loose sight on his left eye. He hadn't, but that was not to say the eye had made a full recovery. The vision on his left eye had been a bit blurred ever since. It was a weakness Zuko was ashamed of, but had learned to compensate for.

So, Zuko was not delusional enough to think that Toph wanted or needed help or pity. Far from it. Even now, in Zuko's opinion, Toph was a dangerously powerful and resourceful earthbender first. She was also a brave and openminded young woman. Her blindness did not define who she was.

'This is amazing!'

 Toph exclaimed, and changed the topic seamlessly. 'I didn't know dragons can speak. In fact, I didn't know there were still dragons.'

'I didn't know it was possible to see with your feet', Zuko shot back, annoyed with himself for having once again revealed national secrets to a perfect stranger. The girl wasn't nearly as afraid of him as any sane person would have been, and it was actually rather unnerving.

'You are inside my head', Toph stated. Thoughtful but not afraid.

Another unusual reaction. 'Most people find it offensive', Zuko

admitted. 'Aren't_ you offended?'

'You kidding me?' Toph replied. 'This is _way_ cooler than talking to badger-moles.'

Zuko blinked. Maybe he had misinterpreted that.

'Oh, gush, I hit you with a rock', Toph suddenly recalled. 'You alright?'

Zuko tried to move his left shoulder and had to grimace. He peered his long, elastic neck to check the damage. The boulder had hit him with such force that it had scratched his scaly skin. No small achievement taking into consideration that dragon's skin was built to weather fire.

'I'll live.'

Toph nodded. Suddenly, her face formed into a smile. 'You should be more careful who you go around attacking, Flicker.'

Flicker? 'You attacked first', Zuko had to point out.

'No, I tied you down. Had I been trying to attack you, you would be out for the count.'

'Big talk.'

'Hey! I would have totally taken you down if you hadn't cheated!' The girl exclaimed.

Zuko was vary. Toph appeared upset, maybe even angry, but then she smiled again playfully.

'You are difficult to read', Zuko admitted. It was odd how easy it was for him to talk to this stranger.

'Years of practice. I have a killer poker face', Toph admitted, and Zuko was relatively sure she meant it, too.

Toph continued: 'It isn't easy to be a master earthbender, but it's a lot harder when you have to let people think you are a pathetic little girl.'

Zuko was confused, so Toph explained that her parents did not expect much of her. Nothing but quiet obedience. Nothing more than her being everything they thought she should be, and a madly skilled earthbender wasn't what they had asked for.

Zuko realized that he had been wrong to think Toph was like his sister. Her life reminded him much more of another girl he used to know. Mai had always had hidden skills and interests and a good poker face to go with them. Better than Zuko's for sure.

Toph was awfully quiet, so Zuko decided to take initiative: 'I understand. I, too, let my family down. I was never as good as was expected of me.'

'Ouch.' Toph considered that for a while. 'Is that why you are here alone?'

_ 'Yes.' _

_ 'You run away from home?' _

_ 'I was banished.' _

_ 'Seriously? Well... their loss.' _

Zuko blinked twice, but the girl's words still made no sense.

_ 'You know', _Toph went on_, 'with you being such a nice dragon and all. It is their loss if they didn't see how awesome you actually are.' _

Zuko was still baffled. '_But... we must respect our parents. They are... right.' _

Toph snorted.

Zuko tried to explain: '_My Father is powerful and wise. He had his reasons.' _

A nagging doubt asked Zuko that if his Father was so righteous, why did he want his own son dead? Zuko would not allow himself to think in that way. _He wouldn't have killed me. He couldn't have._

_ 'Killed you? Who tried to kill you?' _

_ 'No one.' _Too bad Zuko wasn't a good liar. He would have to be more careful and not let inner monologues turn into inner dialogs. '_I should go.' _

_ 'Fine. Actually, I should head home pretty soon too, before anyone starts wondering where I am'_, Toph sounded nonchalant, but there was a bitter edge to her voice. Even so, Zuko broke the connection.

_ 'She is in a hurry to return to her life based on a lie. Well, at least she can go home.' _

Zuko couldn't blame her. If Zuko had to pretend to be something he wasn't to make Ozai accept him, he just might do it.

Earlier, Zuko would have thought it unnecessary. The old Zuko wanted to believe that after he returned home, he and Ozai would have an open and honest relationship. That his Father would listen to his son's opinions on war and other important matters.

Somehow, Zuko could no longer picture any of that.

Irrational as it may be, Zuko wished more than ever that he had stayed with Uncle. _The only family I have left._

Toph began walking away, but she stopped after a few steps. Biting her lip, she turned to Zuko: "Where are you going to go?"

Zuko shrugged, which was not only a conveniently non-verbal gesture but also quite true. He had no idea where he would go. He just wanted

to be somewhere else.

It occurred to Zuko that shrugging was probably a pretty useless way to reply to a blind girl, but before he had time to think of another, Toph went on: "I was just asking because... if you'll be in the neighborhood for a while, it would be nice to hang again."

Zuko was stunned. _After all the bad things I did to her, she still wants to hang with me?_

Not long ago Zuko had tried to take a great deal of pride in who he was and where he came from, but now that pride had all but crumbled away. Right now, he couldn't think of any reason why anyone would want to have anything to do with him (the lonely loser he was), but Toph seemed sincere nonetheless.

Odd. Kind of like Uncle.

"See, I sometimes hang out with badger-moles, but as good listeners as they are, they are pretty lousy when it comes to making conversation. If you have to go then I get it and it's fine but... I just thought you should know that if you are staying, you have nothing to fear from me. I won't tell anyone I met you. They won't even know _I _was here."

She.. really wants me to stay? This earthbending midget who thinks I am awesome. _She also thinks I'm a dragon and has no clue about my true identity, but this is pretty unexpected regardless._

Although Zuko had taken a break from his old life only days ago, he had already run into, by his standards, a myriad of people, and each odder than the other. He couldn't tell if this was in any ways normal or not since for years he had been so focused on his mission that he had rarely taken true interest in other people's lives. Zuko almost never stayed in one place long enough to really get to know anyone new.

Now Zuko felt torn. It felt good to be wanted, but trust wasn't one of his strong suits. He made a brief connection to the girl. Just one question.

_ 'Why?' _

Toph smiled absently, looking more insecure than during their entire encounter so far: "You sounded like you could use a friend and, to be perfectly honest, so could I."

15. Building Bridges, Destroying Dams

15. Building Bridges, Destroying Dams

Wow. I was saved by a supposedly extinct, smart, supernatural creature, and I didn't even realize to ask what his name was. Actually, I don't even know if the dragon is a he.

Sokka did not feel like dwelling on the topic of where baby dragons came from. Instead he focused his attention on trying to figure out where he was. He had a vague memory of what the map of the area looked like, and now all he needed was a recognizable landmark.

Something that would not have changed in the last hundred or so years.

"Let's see what we have here: trees over there and there, and over here we have... some more trees. That's helpful", Sokka commented to himself. He hated to admit it, but he was officially lost. The scenery around him was beautiful, with trees glowing in autumn tints, but they all looked the same.

I can't believe I made sure Ilya and Ari were going to be okay but totally forgot to consider the possibility that I wouldn't be. Typical.

The sun had risen hours ago, and Sokka had used this to regain a sense of direction. He was heading east and back towards the shore (or at least he _hoped_ that was where he was heading).

Sokka tried to keep up a positive attitude, but he was gradually loosing hope that his friends would find him. Heck, he wasn't even sure that they were _looking_ for him. Katara and Aang would not intentionally leave him behind, but there was the chance that they were in even bigger trouble than he was.

Even presuming that Katara and Aang were okay and actively searching for him, they still would not know where to start looking. They would probably guess that he had been captured by the pirates, which would lead them to a wrong direction.

Katara and Aang might find out that the Earth Kingdom Militia was involved, but that, too, would be a bad thing, because odds were that the Militia would not be glad to see the Avatar or help him find Sokka. Not after the way their previous encounter had ended, and even if the Militia would tell Katara and Aang all that had happened, how could they guess where a dragon had taken him?

And as if hiking in the woods wasn't arduous enough, Sokka was starting to have a headache. More exactly, he was probably having the same headache that the pirates had given him, but now it was back with a vengeance. He should have probably followed doctor's orders and not exert himself in any way.

The bandage the Militia had tied around his head was starting drip with sweat, so Sokka took it off. His forehead was not bleeding anymore, but it still itched uncomfortably.

Sokka sat down. The day was getting hotter and hotter as the sun climbed higher, and Sokka wished he had some water with him.

S_seriously though. Why don't I carry a waterskin with me? You don't have to be a bender to appreciate the element._

On the South Pole, it had not made much sense to carry water with him, since snow, fresh water or ice was almost always available, if you simply knew how to melt or boil it.

Something passed in front of the sun, momentarily casting a shadow over Sokka's path. Sokka was immediately on alert and back on his feet. His first thought was that the dragon had returned.

When Sokka peered at the sky to see, he realized that he could see Appa flying in the distance.

Okay, that should have been my first guess, really.

Sokka began to yell and wave his hands to catch his friends' attention, but the distance was too vast. The bison made no move to indicate that they had heard him. Instead Appa was moving slowly but steadily away from Sokka.

You are the idea guy. Think of something, Sokka told himself.

The first idea that came to mind was to build a signal fire. Even during daylight, the cloud of smoke could be enough to catch his friends' attention.

But since Sokka was not a firebender, building and creating a bonfire out of scratch would take a long time. Not that Sokka would have wanted to be a firebender; this just happened to be one of those incredibly rare occasions when firebending could have come in handy.

Next, Sokka thought of scaling a tree and waving at them from there, but in the end he had to be realistic: Sokka didn't have much experience in tree climbing, so he would probably just end up falling on his face.

If Sokka had shiny metal objects with him, he could try to reflect sunlight off of them, and maybe catch Katara and Aang's attention. But Sokka had no metal objects with him: even his fishhooks were made of bone.

Okay, another thing to add to my lists of things I really ought to have with me at all times. But what now?

The bison was flying further and further away, and Sokka was getting anxious. They were so close and yet so far.

Although he knew it was pretty pointless, Sokka started to run after the bison, trying to keep it in his sight. The boy rampaged through one bush after another, and the branches scratched his skin. Still, no matter how hard he ran, the bison got smaller and smaller against the bright sky.

No, no, no. Get back here. Please, Sokka begged in his mind.

He was completely out of breath but he couldn't give up. Just one more bush...

Sokka rounded one more bush and stopped dead in his tracks. Not because he was too tired to continue running but because he wasn't alone in the forest.

Sokka had entered a clearing, and on the clearing there was a Fire Nation Camp full of Fire Nation soldiers. The soldiers looked as surprised to see Sokka as Sokka was to see them.

Oh, crap.

ooo

"Did you hear that?" Aang asked, and looked around himself to see if there was something going on down in the forest below.

"Yes, I did", Katara answered, lifting her head from where she had been resting it against her hands.

She looked tired, and Aang knew why: Katara had not slept last night. She blamed herself for what had happened to Sokka, because she was the one who stole from the pirates in the first place.

Aang actually thought it had been rather clever of Katara to take the waterbending scroll, and she had been right to take it. It was too bad that the whole endeavor had ended the way it did, but Aang thought Katara was being too hard on herself. Aang was worried for Sokka, too, but they were already doing all they could to find him.

The Militia had been less than helpful when Aang and Katara had gone to them to ask if they knew where Sokka was. After that Aang and Katara had been flying around, hoping to get lucky, but Aang was getting tired of the gloomy atmosphere. Sitting in silence in Appa's saddle worrying wasn't going to make them find Sokka any faster.

They still had the scroll, but they hadn't yet been able to study its contents because right now Katara wanted to keep it out of her sight. It was a constant reminder of the fact that Sokka was still missing.

An even louder boom echoed in the air.

"There!" Katara pointed at a patch of forest. A thin line of smoke had begun to rise from there.

Aang nodded. "What do you think it is?"

"The Fire Nation", Katara said solemnly. She was probably right, but Aang still didn't like the way Katara's tone and expression darkened every time she spoke of the Fire Nation. It was unnerving to see her so sad and angry.

"You think they're going to burn down the forest again?" Aang asked, his voice full of sincere worry.

"Whatever they are doing, we need to stop it", Katara concluded.

"You're right. Yep yep, Appa."

Aang guided his bison down, and soon they reached the source of the smoke. There appeared to be a fight going on. Aang peered down and attempted to determine who was fighting who.

It looked Fire Nation was the other party, but he wasn't quite sure who they were fighting against. Another small explosion occurred on the ground, blowing a Fire Nation tent down and leaving a little smoking trench in its wake.

Suddenly Katara reached over to Aang and yanked his tunic so hard

that the airbender almost lost balance.

"Look! It's Sokka!" she cried out and pointed at a man dressed in Water Tribe blue. Sokka appeared to be caught right in the middle of the fight. "We have gotta help him!"

Aang hurried Appa down and joined the fight, throwing a few Fire Nation soldiers off their feet with his fans. Aang still wasn't sure who the Fire Nation was fighting, but they had to be the good guys, so he of course sided with them.

"Sokka! Over here! We came to rescue you!" Aang yelled when he got close to Sokka.

Sokka turned around and a smile crossed his face. Katara had also climbed down from the bison and was now running towards her brother.

Out of nowhere, a Fire Nation soldier with a spear blocked Katara's way. Before Katara or Aang or Sokka had time to react, another person swooped in and took the soldier down with crafty use of hook swords.

Katara's savior was a young, dark-haired man with ragged clothing. Casually chewing a straw, he turned to face Katara and Aang.

The young man smiled playfully and said: "At your service." Then he charged off again, taking on a soldier Sokka had been about to attack with a boomerang.

It turned out that the Fire Nation soldiers were fighting a group of kids, but thankfully the kids were winning. They used various weapons and fighting techniques to catch the soldiers off guard. With Aang and Katara's help, the fight was over soon, and they finally reached Sokka.

"Sokka!" Katara exclaimed and hugged her brother, tears running down her face. "I was _so_ worried. Don't ever do that again!"

"Glad to see you too, sis'", Sokka replied, his voice a bit choked due to Katara's tight embrace. "And you too, Aang", Sokka greeted him over Katara's shoulder.

Aang smiled widely. "Good to see you're okay. We've been looking all over for you."

"Back at you", Sokka sighed and tried to wave his sister off, but Katara did not let go. Now she looked serious and a bit sad. Sokka caught on to her mood, and hugged back tighter for a moment. "I really am fine."

Katara sighed and let go of her brother, now meeting Sokka face to face. "I am sorry. You could have gotten hurt, and it's all my fault."

"Hurt? Me? The greatest warrior of the Southern Water Tribe? Hardly", Sokka tried to lighten the mood. "Besides, take my word for it: most of the mess I have gotten myself into recently has been no one's fault but mine."

Katara cast her eyes down and bit back tears. "I... I stole the waterbending scroll."

First Sokka's expression was blank. The implications did not sink in immediately. Then a look of disbelief and anger crossed his face, though his voice remained alarmingly calm: "You... you stole from the pirates? That's why they came after us with forks and knives?"

Katara nodded.

"How irresponsible, no, selfish, do you have to do that? I know that learning waterbending means a lot to you, but you would steal from the pirates? Really, Katara? Don't you think of anyone but yourself?"

Katara was getting some of her usual spirit back. "I... It wasn't just for me. Aang needs to learn waterbending. The world depends on it."

"Yeah, it's true", Aang swiftly agreed, coming to Katara's defense. Sokka was being too hard on her. He didn't know how much she had already suffered because of this.

"Don't kid yourself. You didn't do it for Aang. We both know the one person you were thinking of was you. And since when have you began stealing? Gran Gran raised you better than that. Mom raised you better than that", Sokka ranted.

Katara's eyes teared up when Sokka mentioned their mother. Her face darkened, first because of hurt, and then by anger. "Wake up, Sokka! We are in war. There is no time to be nice or play by the book. Do you think the Fire Nation cares if they steal stuff?"

Sokka no longer looked angry, but he kept arguing: "I don't care how much the Fire Nation has stolen. You didn't steal from the Fire Nation. You only went down to their level."

Katara huffed angrily and turned away from Sokka. An uncomfortable silence stretched between the siblings. Eventually Sokka sighed and continued in a calmer tone: "Look, I am sorry I compared you to the Fire Nation. That was uncalled for and I didn't mean it. I have just... had a pretty long and eventful day."

"Yeah, I'm sure we're all tired", Aang pitched in. He did not like the way this meeting was playing out. Katara and Sokka loved one another, and still everything was going wrong. This was a reunion. Reunions were supposed to be happy.

"Hi there."

Aang, Katara and Sokka turned to look. The boy who had earlier rescued Katara was now approaching them. "I would hate to interrupt your, um, moment, but I wanted to ask if you are alright."

"Um, yeah", Aang began, but was interrupted by Katara. "We're good. Thank you for your help. You were wonderful back there."

The boy smiled at her. "You weren't too bad yourself. You and your friend, both", he gestured at Aang and Katara.

"And you", the boy turned to Sokka, "were a great distraction. Me and my men had been waiting for hours for an opportunity to ambush these Fire Nation troops."

"Glad I could be of some help", Sokka said with a sullen tone that contradicted his statement. "And by the way, who are you guys?"

"Ah, where are my manners?" the boy wondered and did an elaborate stage bow. "The name is Jet, and these are my freedom fighters."

It looked like Jet was about to introduce them to everyone in his gang, but Sokka cut in: "Yeah, about that. You are not the first freedom fighters we have run into. Not by any chance are you in league with the Earth Kingdom Militia?"

Jet looked surprised, but he composed himself quickly. "No, we are not. Don't get me wrong; the Militia is doing important work and all, but the Fire Nation is the enemy. Getting rid of them should be every proper Earth Kingdom citizens number one priority."

"Hey, that's exactly what we said to the Militia", Aang pointed out.

"Yeah, and speaking of the Militia: Sokka, what happened between you and Shen? When we went to see him, Aang and I had to literally fight our way out of their encampment", Katara turned to her brother for answers.

"Yeah, uh. I was going to give you the heads up about that", Sokka swallowed, and looked like he was having a hard time finding the right words. "The Militia kind of rescued me, and I repaid their generosity by sort of stealing a prisoner from them. I don't think they are too happy with me at the moment."

"No way." Katara stated. "And you lectured me about stealing."

Aang tried to turn the conversation away from the fight it was once again turning into. "Shen said you had aided the Fire Nation, but of course we didn't believe him, because we know you would never do that."

"Aiding the Fire Nation is a huge exaggeration, but not, in so many words, a lie", Sokka looked uncomfortable. "I mean, it just wasn't right, what they were going. They were pinning everything Fire nation has done on this one soldier. A girl soldier. Something had to be done, 'cause... You really should have been there at the time to get it now. It felt like a good idea when Ilya explained it..."

Katara looked appalled. Jet sounded surprised when he asked: "You freed a Fire Nation soldier?"

"I know, I know. It sounds awful, but the Militia were at least as much to be blamed. I mean, they were going to kill her for no other reason than that she was Fire Nation", Sokka explained to Jet, and then turned to Aang. "You are with me on this, right Aang? You are against capital punishment and all that."

Aang didn't like being drawn into the argument, but he did have an opinion on the matter and he wanted it known. "All life is sacred. I don't want anyone to have to die."

"Are you both out of your minds?" Katara suddenly exploded. "They are Fire Nation! They killed all the Air Nomads! They are the reason we haven't seen our father in two years! They killed mom! This whole war, all of it, is their fault!"

"Hey! I saved one Fire Nation woman, and since she didn't look about 120-years-old, we can hardly hold the Air Nomad card against her!" Sokka replied angrily.

"And if we had a Fire Nation prisoner, you wouldn't just kill her!" Aang argued.

Katara looked surprised that the boys were teaming up against her on this.

Jet stepped closer, holding his hands up in a calming gesture. "Look, I get it. The war is an emotional topic for everyone, but you have to remember that the day we let the Fire Nation turn us against our friends is the day we loose this war. Instead of focusing on what separates us we really should focus on the things that we have in common. And that is our need to destroy the Fire Nation."

Jet turned to face Katara. "I know exactly how you feel. I, too, have lost my parents to the Fire Nation."

"Really?" Katara sniffed. "I am so sorry."

Jet placed a hand on Katara's shoulder and smiled at her gently. "But it is all in the past now, and we have got to focus on the future. What do you say we agree to disagree and get going, because I don't think any of us want to be around when the Fire Nation comes back."

"That's true!" Aang perked up, eager to change the topic. "Do you guys live around here?"

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Early the next morning

Zuko woke up with the sun, finally catching up to his usual sleeping rhythm. He lay on the grass and let the pale morning sun warm his scaly skin. He was still at the same clearing he had landed on yesterday.

Zuko told himself it was because he had been too lazy to relocate for the night. Truth be told, he was hoping that his strange, newly-gained acquaintance would return. She had promised she would.

Zuko took deep breaths to warm himself and began to meditate. He had always known the sun was the source of every firebenders' power, but now that he was a dragon, his symbiotic relationship with his element felt even more natural.

Zuko's ear moved as he thought he heard a sound coming from behind

him. Surely Toph wouldn't be silly enough to walk in on a sleeping dragon twice?

Zuko got to his feet and looked around himself. He wasn't exactly alarmed, just curious. As far as he could tell, there was no reason for humans to come to this part of the forest. If what he had heard was an animal, it would not come close. Any sensible creature kept a distance from a large predator.

It was odd that although Zuko had not eaten in days, he wasn't particularly hungry. Slower metabolism, perhaps. Large animals did not eat as often as humans did.

Finally, Zuko's eyes made out the source of the sound. On the other side of the clearing, a tunnel appeared out of nowhere, and out of the tunnel walked Toph.

Only upon seeing the girl Zuko realized just how much he had hoped that she would come back. And how much he had feared she wouldn't.

Zuko huffed to greet Toph and to make it clear she had been seen. Toph smiled in return and waved her hand roughly at Zuko's direction. Then she walked up to him.

"Hi, Flicker. Man, you should have seen the look on my earthbending teacher's face when he thought I had overexerted myself so badly that I needed to stay in bed for the whole day."

Zuko created a mental link to Toph, unable to resist retorting: '_I bet you would have liked to see it, too.'_

'Making fun of the handicapped, are we?' Toph replied and created a tiny rock slide under Zuko's front paws, so that he sank into the ground, effectively demonstrating just how handicapped she was.

Toph laughed, and Zuko sort of laughed a throaty dragon version of laughter. He couldn't tell how different it was from his usual laugh, because he couldn't remember when was the last time he had laughed. Probably before the Agni Kai.

"So, what do you wanna do today?" Toph asked and freed him from the ground.

Zuko shrugged, which caused his left shoulder to hurt. Zuko winced ever so slightly.

"Uh, sorry about that", Toph apologized again.

'How does she know these things?' _Zuko pondered, but he knew better than to ask. The only response he would get would be 'because I am the greatest earthbender in the world'. It was Toph's motto.

"There is a network of tunnels under this clearing. We could go check them out, if you want. They are big enough for badger-moles, so you should have no problem fitting in. Though it might get a bit crowded if we _do_ run into badger-moles... But don't worry. I've got your back. So, what do you say?"

Zuko could not have been less tempted. Not even if Toph hadn't

brought up the possibility of encountering gigantic earthbender animals while surrounded by their element.

Uncle often said that Zuko took too many risks, and maybe he was right, but Zuko did usually make an effort to avoid unnecessary and stupid risks.

Instead Zuko made a counter-suggestion. He waved his head, and gestured towards the sky.

"Mm, oh great. More flying", Toph, too, sounded less than enthusiastic. "I guess flying would be fun for someone who knows how to fly. Or better yet, fly and see."

Zuko intended to shrug but remembered his shoulder in time and simply nodded.

Toph went on: "I kinda envy you."

Zuko didn't know what to say. He wasn't used to people envying his life. He communicated as much: '_People don't usually envy me. They hate, fear and sometimes pity me, but not envy.'_

"Oh, I didn't mean that I want to be you, or even that I want to be a dragon or anything like that. If you ask me, flying is totally overrated. I am quite happy being the awesome earthbender that I am. What I meant was that although I bet your life isn't easy, and your past sure as hell hasn't been, I think you have some good things going for you. You are so... free. That's the part I envy."

Free? Zuko was surprised by Toph's choice of word. The banished Prince of Fire Nation was surely one of the least free people in the world. His entire life had been all about trying to live up to people's expectations of him. Zuko had never been free, and even though he had left his old life behind him, he still didn't feel relieved.

There are people in prisons who are more free than I am, Zuko replied solemnly.

Toph made a face. "At least you don't have overcautious moron parents who won't let you out of the house, because they think you won't be able to _handle it._ Who thinks you are a precious porcelain doll that needs to be kept tidy and safe, and away from other people and, spirits forbid, excitement."

Zuko, who had spent the last three years of his life on the road, tried to picture what it would be like to live your entire life inside four walls. It was surprisingly easy, since he himself had lived a relatively harbored life in the palace prior to his banishment.

I see your point, but look at it this way: at least your parents care whether you are safe or not, Zuko replied.

"Maybe, but I'm not sure you can call locking your child away from the world 'caring'", Toph pointed out. "If I weren't such an independent person, I may never have learnt how to take care of myself, and I would have been reliant on other people my entire life. Wanting that for your child isn't wanting what's best for her."

Zuko understood Toph's point. She was unhappy with her life, but had no means of changing it without upsetting her family. '_That's hard.'_

Toph visibly drew herself up. "That's enough about my woeful life. What about you? Why don't you feel free, despite being able to go wherever you want whenever you want?"

'I have duties. Just because I am ignoring them right now doesn't mean they weren't still there. Also... I worry over someone I left behind. It is hard to feel at ease when you are not sure whether the people you care about are safe or not.'

"So, there is someone who cares about my pet dragon, after all. Other than me, that is. You must tell me more about this mystery decent person, so that I know my competition", Toph said in a playful tone.

Against all odds, Zuko was okay with this topic. Although talking about Iroh was a sure way to make him worry, his Uncle was one of the very few things in his life that were... right.

Zuko told Toph about how Uncle had come with him in his banishment, followed him wherever he went and kept him company. Only now, in his new-found loneliness, Zuko was starting to appreciate all that Iroh had done for him over the years.

'By all intents and purposes, Uncle is the only family I have. In the light of recent events, I am beginning to think that he might have been the only family I've had even before my banishment' , Zuko concluded.

He briefly wondered if he should clarify that his Uncle wasn't a dragon, as one might assume under the circumstances. However, explaining how that was possible would have led to a never-ending series of other things that needed to be explained, so Zuko did not make the distinction.

Zuko knew he would have to tell Toph the truth eventually, but since they had only known each other for a few days, he was okay with playing a dragon for now.

"Your Uncle sounds like a really cool guy", Toph said thoughtfully. "He cares, but also lets you make your own decisions, even at the risk of making a mistake. I wish my parents were more like that."

'You and me both.'

Toph tried to sound casual when asking her next question, but the biting of lip gave her away: "So, when are you going to go back to him? Your uncle, I mean."

'I am... not sure.'

For the first time since leaving, Zuko couldn't kid himself into believing that he wasn't going back. Admitting it was actually a relief. Zuko's recent lack of direction had been wearing him down more than tirelessly working towards a goal ever had.

_ 'Soon, I think.' _

Toph smiled. "I am happy for you. I'll miss you, but I'm happy you have a family to go back to."

Zuko hesitated, but after Toph had been so nice to him, he felt obliged to say: '_If you are unhappy here and want to leave, I could take you somewhere. Anywhere you want to go.' _

"Would you take me with you?"

_ 'I don't think you would be happy where I'm going. My life is complicated and I have a difficult road ahead of me. Difficult and dangerous.' _

"You think I'm afraid?" Toph challenged.

_ 'Also, you might have to enlist in Fire Nation Navy to be allowed to go with me' _ , Zuko added, immediately regretting that he had given so much away about his true identity.

Toph looked puzzled, but she asked nothing about it, so hopefully she thought he had been kidding. In a way he had. Maybe.

Zuko tried to fix the situation with further explanations: '_You know, because I am sort of Fire Nation and since you don't like flying you could only follow me on sea and... Uh...' _

"Got it, Flicker. I might be blind but I'm not _blind_. I sort of figured out on my own that dragons are fire. You know, with the flames and everything", Toph pointed out. "Honestly, though, I cannot come with you, not even if you asked. My parents might be jerks sometimes, but they are my jerks. They mean well, and I am not so ungrateful that I would put them through their only child eloping with a firebender. Plus, what would they do without me?"

Zuko understood what Toph was really saying._ No matter how blind her parents are, she isn't ready to let them down. She is hoping that they will come around and see things her way, and that she can start living her life the way she wants to live it._

Zuko would have wanted to comfort her by saying that he was sure they would come around eventually, but he had never been much of a liar. He couldn't bring himself to shatter her already dwindling hope, either, so he only nodded to show that he had heard and understood.

For a while neither said anything. Long before the silence got uncomfortable, Toph's smile widened, and she said: "I know what we should do next. You want to fly and I want to go under ground, right? I say we decide which plan we go through with a friendly sparring match."

Toph smiled innocently when saying the word 'friendly'. Zuko smiled back. They were so well on the same page that it was almost frightening. _Nothing better to keep your mind off your worries than a challenging workout._

ooo

"I knew it. The first time I lay my eyes on you I just knew it", Jet said.

Sokka rolled his eyes, but since the self-proclaimed freedom fighter didn't continue, he was forced to ask: "Knew what?"

"That you could not be trusted", Jet answered dramatically.

Sokka had just about had it with this guy. "Wait a second. Let's get this straight. You are the one who is planning to trick my sister and my friend into helping you destroy a village full of innocent people, and I'm the one who shouldn't be trusted."

"They are not innocent. They are Fire Nation. I thought you would see that. They killed your mother."

"You thought that I would see things your way? Was this before or after you knew for sure I couldn't be trusted?"

Jet looked at him with open disgust. "Your sister understands things much better. How you turned out such a traitor is beyond me."

Right. So this was about their earlier conversation, where Sokka had revealed that he had helped Ari escape. He had suspected that that was why Jet had been so cold towards him whenever they were alone, although he was all sugary sweetness when Katara or Aang was around.

In fact, Sokka had had his suspicions about Jet from the get-go, but since his sister and friend had refused to trust his warrior's instinct on the matter, he had had no choice but to secretly follow the freedom fighter and his ragtag lot to their suspicious early morning meeting.

Good thing he had, too. Now Sokka knew what the blasting jelly was really for.

If it weren't for Jet's lackeys holding him in place, Sokka would have punched the guy. As it was, his options were reduced to sarcastic comments: "If you think Katara is so different and better, then why don't you go back to the camp and tell her what you are really planning to do with the water. See how understanding she is then, hmm?"

"Take him away", Jet ordered his troops, "and keep a tight hold on him. There is no limit to what a spineless traitor like him might do."

Sokka could not help but feel a twinge of guilt at Jet's words. Although the boy was obviously crazy and wrong about him, Jet did almost have a point.

This was the second time in a matter of days that Sokka found himself siding with the Fire Nation, although just a few days ago he would have thought such a thing impossible. Creepy.

Sokka was worried about what his father Hakoda would say, when he learned of all the things his son had done, but Sokka brushed those concerns aside. They could wait, but the village could not. Sokka had

to find some way to warn the villagers of their impending doom.

ooo

Toph was holding on for dear life._ Next time_, she reminded herself, _don't let Flicker cheat._

Toph was the greatest earthbender in the world, but even she had her weaknesses. One of the most critical one being that she couldn't see things that weren't touching the ground. Things such as flying dragons. Another one being that Toph didn't know how to swim, but that was off the point.

She and Flicker were both great benders, and they both had a good deal of battle experience and street smarts. In a purely bending-based battle, Toph was convinced she would emerge victorious. As it was, her new best friend wasn't human, which gave Flicker an unfair advantage.

Toph had, in the end, let him off a bit easy. Flicker was her _only_ real friend, and Toph didn't want to risk losing that.

Though next time, there will be none of that. No cutting slack, Toph swore to herself.

She still could not see the glamor of flying, and she seriously doubted she ever would. You would think that flying would be unnerving for everyone, with or without sight, since being able to see didn't give you any extra protection against falling off._ I bet flying is only fun for those who can fly._

To Toph, flying was scary and boring, since she might die any moment, but other than that nothing was really going on in her line of senses. She decided to concentrate on Flicker's heartbeat and warmth.

Toph didn't have much experience in the matter, but as far as she could tell, Flicker was flying fast. The dragon mostly soared around, and sometimes flapped his wings, which caused his whole body to shake.

The dragon moved in a wiggly way, but the wiggling had a rhythm to it. Cold wind was brushing against Toph's face and shuffling her hair, but she didn't mind the cold. It was refreshing compared to the warm, almost hot body of the dragon.

Hey, at least this will be good practice in case I need to fly again sometime, Toph thought, before she realized that the odds of her becoming a frequent flyer were almost astronomically small. All the creatures that used to roam the skies, namely dragons and flying bison, were extinct. Well, clearly more so in theory than in practice.

And who knew? Perhaps Toph and Flicker would be spending more time with each other in the future.

Suddenly, Flicker changed direction and picked up speed.

"Whoa. What's the hurry?" Toph shouted over the gushing wind.

First she thought she wasn't going to get a response, but then a brief message came through: '_I'm hunting.'_

"Hunting what?"

'I don't know. That's the fun part.'

"Yeah, hilarious! Slow down and land right _now_!"

To Toph's surprise, the dragon did as he was told. Flicker started to descent almost immediately. Finally, Toph could tell Flicker made touchdown. She jumped down herself, letting the earth embrace her.

"We really gotta..." Toph began but was silenced by a mental '_shh'._

She felt like asking what now, but then she realized she already knew. Wherever they were, they were not alone. Within her 'line of sight', there was another creature. A big one.

'We are hunting that?' Toph asked in disbelief. '_You are insane. It has gotta be over ten times your mass! What is that thing?'_

'A flying bison', the dragon replied, his tone suddenly weary.

Toph made a mental note to have a word with her biology teacher about the varying definitions of 'extinct'.

'Well, I am sorry to have to be the one to break this to you, but the bison is totally out of your league', she pointed out.

Before Flicker had time to respond, the wind changed direction. For a moment, it blew from behind them. The bison raised his head in alarm. He must have smelled the predator lurking downwind.

The bison made a bellowing sound, and with surprising agility, lifted himself off the ground. Toph prepared herself, feeling vulnerable the way she always did when things moved out of her range, but no attack came.

"You mind telling me what the ten-ton beast is up to?" Toph asked through clenched jaws.

"He is going back to his master', her friend responded cryptically. Toph got the feeling that something crucial was being left unsaid.

"Too bad", Toph retorted, still not feeling at ease. "Next time, I..."

But Flicker never got to hear what they would do next time, because a thundering boom swallowed the rest of Toph's words.

The earth shook hard, which was unnatural. Earth was supposed to be steady, not whimsy. There were no earthquakes in these parts of the Kingdom.

Toph felt disoriented. Her world was quite literally shaking, and it was blurring her sight.

Toph focused. She was a master earthbender. She could do this. And then she saw it.

Actually, Toph didn't so much see it as she felt it against her element. It was a powerful beast with a thousand heads, and it was moving fast.

For a blink of an eye Toph froze. The thought '_I can't swim!_' screamed in her head.

Then Flicker was there by her side. '_A dam broke. A flood wave coming. Won't hit us. Will hit a village!_'

His thoughts were desperate. Toph realized that there was nothing Flicker could do to save the village. But she could. Or at least she would try.

She was the greatest earthbender in the world, and now it was time to live up to the title. Even if it meant taking on an enormous, fast-moving, unstoppable beast invisible to her eyes.

Toph gathered all her strength and lifted as big a wall as she could. She created the wall between the village and the oncoming flood, but the momentum of the wave was too great. Most of the water crashed through her wall with ease.

'Water wants to move! You can't stop it; you must redirect it!'
_Flicker shouted advise inside her head. '_Dig!_'

Toph's hands were sweating. She only had time for one more try.
Better make it count.

She gestured her hands in an unnaturally _flowy_ movement. She moved a huge chunk of dried up riverbed in an attempt to create a new route for the river. Then she quickly lifted a channel with high, thick walls on the side of the village, hoping it would be enough to guide the water past the town.

It worked. The tsunami hit the sides of the channel hard, but most of the water bent before Toph's earth, and followed the easier path laid for it.

Toph took a deep breath, only now remembering to breathe. She had been in fights before, but it had never been this serious. Never a question of life or death.

Toph felt actually proud of herself. More proud than she had felt winning an Earth Rumble. This was real, not some show, and that made it heck of a lot more meaningful.

Not bad for a days work.

'You did it!' _Flicker chimed. '_You're amazing!_'

"Don't I know it?" Toph said, but both her voice and body were still shaking.

"Next time", she paused to breathe, "would be nice to leave a few seconds to spare. Good thing I was here, though. This accident could have ended badly."

_ 'Not. An. Accident.' _

Flicker's thoughts were suddenly full of rage. Toph had never seen him that angry. The fury was radiating from his presence so hard that Toph would have taken a step back had her ego allowed it.

_ 'A flaming arrow. Explosives. Someone did this on purpose. Someone is going to _pay_. ' _

Toph nodded. "Lead the way."

()()()

****A/N****

Some of you (namely AgniFox) have wondered exactly how big Dragon Zuko is. Since one picture tells more than a thousand words, I have uploaded a drawing that has a picture of Zuko as both, a dragon and a human. A link to the picture can be found on my profile page.

I actually drew a bunch of sketches of Zuko as a dragon and as a human sporting different outfits before I started writing this fic, partially to ensure I had a clear picture in my mind of what I was describing, and partially because it is fun to draw Zuko.

16. Blame Game

****16. Blame Game****

_ Zuko, where are you? _

Iroh was standing at the rail of the ship. It was still anchored at the same harbor where he and Zuko had left it when they'd gone out 'on a scouting trip for the Avatar'. As much as Iroh would rather have been out somewhere looking for his nephew, he knew that this was where Zuko would come looking for him.

Although there was little left to be done as far as preparations for their next journey were concerned, most of the crew was busy doing something, whether it be going through inventory or polishing the ship. Oddly enough, the discipline appeared to be no less strict in his nephew's absence. Iroh could understand why.

Even if Zuko hadn't exactly made an effort to befriend his crew, after having spent three years on the same ship, they had grown into a rather tight team. Now the men worried, and not just for the lecture they would get if Prince Zuko came back and found his ship in less than adequate condition.

Doing anything was better than sitting around wondering when or if Prince Zuko would come back at all.

Iroh was sure that if Zuko had left by his own free will, he would eventually return. _When he's ready sorting out whatever it is that he needs to sort out._

To be honest, Iroh genuinely wished Zuko wasn't trying come to grips with all his problems at once. He had no doubt that, in the end, his nephew would find his way and grow into the handsome prince he was always meant to be. He just wasn't there yet.

Zuko still carries heavy burdens in his heart. If he is trying to figure out everything at once, this could be a long wait.

The truly nagging thing was that Iroh couldn't be absolutely sure Zuko had left voluntarily. If that was the case...

The morning had been misty, but the last of the moist hanging over the sea had cleared away hours ago. Now it was in every aspect a beautiful day. Perfect for firebending practice.

Iroh sighed quietly.

Please come home soon.

"Sir", Lieutenant Jee bowed before moving on to the actual point, "There's someone here to see you."

Although the lieutenant had a perfectly admirable poker face adequate to the needs of a military officer, Iroh had tuned reading people into a form of art. Thus Jee's body language and tone of voice told him more than just the man's words.

It's no one I'd want to see, but someone powerful enough that saying 'no' is off the table. Certainly not Zuko finally returning from his adventure.

Iroh nodded. He had a strong feeling he knew exactly who had finally decided to honor them with a personal visit.

Iroh had enough time to wipe any traces of disappointment from his face before Commander Zhao came into his view. The old man wasn't surprised to see that the commander hadn't waited for an invitation to come on board.

On the contrary. He walks in here like he owns the place.

In a matter of fact, Zhao didn't in any ways own the ship. The crew was a different topic, one which Iroh suspected Zhao was aware of but one that neither was likely to bring up in this conversation.

"General Iroh", Zhao greeted. Apparently the man had chosen to ignore Uncle's earlier request to be considered a retired general. Probably not so much out of respect but rather because calling the Fire Lord's brother just Iroh would've sounded oddly... friendly.

"Commander Zhao", Iroh greeted as coldly as he could, "What do I owe the pleasure?"

Zhao looked ever-so-casually around himself before answering: "As much as I enjoy your company, I didn't come here for tea. I'm here to see your nephew."

_Of course you're here for my nephew. Maybe the world really is out

to get him._

Iroh had no intentions of giving Zhao any information on Zuko's whereabouts or doings. That, however, wasn't the same as wanting to get rid of the commander as soon as possible. On the contrary.

If you could prove me or my nephew were involved in anything illegal, you would've brought more men with you. No, this visit is purely social in nature. You're here to spy on us. Well, two can play that game.

"I'm sorry to inform you that Prince Zuko isn't here right now."

"Is that so? May I inquire where he's gone?"

Iroh had known this question was coming. He had his answer ready, but the real gist of selling a lie was making it sound like you were lying, but in a way that made people guess wrong what you were lying about. If he wanted Zhao to believe Zuko was out looking for the Avatar that was the last thing he should say.

"Uh, well, I'm not entirely sure. You know what kids that age are like. Coming and going whenever they feel like, not telling their old Uncle anything", Iroh said, scratched the back of his head and smiled like a man hiding something, "He could be back any minute. Tea while you're waiting?"

ooo

Zuko knew what he had to do. His life was usually full of shades of gray, but this situation was appreciatively black and white.

Toph saved the day and casualties were avoided but that doesn't mean the people responsible should get away with what they've done. Who's to say they won't try again?

For a moment all Zuko could see was red. It felt like the blood in his veins was on fire. His whole body shook in waves of rage he was attempting to rein in.

_How _dared _someone attempt to murder _his_ people? The villagers were clearly _civilians_! Anyone could see that this place had no military significance._

Zuko would make them pay. But first he'd have to calm himself down, or he might end up doing something he'd later regret.

Right now Zuko couldn't really think of a punishment so severe he'd later regret having given it, but perhaps later he would. So he needed to calm down first. It was what Uncle would have made him do if the old man was here.

Gradually, steadying himself breath by breath, Zuko got hold of his anger. He focused his mind, and his surroundings cleared out. Toph was still standing next to him. She was calmly waiting, clearly letting him have a moment. Surprisingly clever behavior considering how little the girl had actually seen the world. Figuratively speaking.

Only now Zuko realized the mental link to Toph he'd earlier formed to

assist her in stopping the tidal wave was still on. Quickly Zuko composed himself, making sure no data was being transmitted to either direction. From experience Zuko knew that whenever he was taken over by strong emotions his control over the Power of Dragons weakened, making it hard for him to read or emit anything other than emotions.

Zuko had not actively attempted to convey his feelings to Toph, but as he had not been actively focusing on not emitting his feelings, Toph had probably more or less felt his little moment of inner turmoil back there. Zuko hated how vulnerable and exposed that made him feel. However, Toph didn't appear scared or judgmental.

Instead she nodded and said: "Lead the way."

Zuko nodded back. He'd have time to worry over his carelessness later. Now it was time for action.

But first, he had to let Toph know the full extent of the situation.

The village... Fire Nation. Problem? He cautiously asked. Zuko thought Toph most likely hadn't had time to analyze the village she'd saved long enough to determine it's country of origin (or even if such a thing could be determined by using your feet).

Zuko had wanted to show the village and the wave to her, but he hadn't. Toph seemed to have had a clear enough understanding of the situation, and adding images to that would have most likely been more a distraction than an asset.

The previous time's Zuko had shown her mental pictures it had blown the young earthbender away, causing her to lose focus. Thus, Zuko hadn't shown Toph the village or its flaming red colors. She probably still had no idea what type of mess she was really getting herself into.

Toph nodded. For a moment she was quiet; probably thinking it through, and Zuko didn't interrupt her. Faster than Zuko had anticipated, she continued: "So? Last I checked nationality was no excuse for a massacre."

That hadn't stopped the Fire Nation from wiping out the Air Nomads... Zuko would have liked to tell himself it wasn't the same thing.

Toph braced herself, looking confident, even cocky: "Which way did the arrow come from?"

Zuko let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. It apparently didn't bother Toph that she was assisting enemies. Were all female earthbenders this... unusual? Not only had Toph miraculously saved the day, she also didn't appear as, well, anti-Fire Nation as one might expect.

The arrow came from a tree. Jump on board. I'll hunt him.

"More flying? Great", Toph rolled her eyes, "Fine, but I was just thinking: can't you show me what you see, you know, like you did the day we met, so that I don't have to go into a battle blind?"

Zuko shook his head. He had considered that possibility earlier, too, but had decided against it.

_Need to focus on flying, _Zuko responded.

It was at least partially the truth. Zuko had not been a dragon for very long and flying was surprisingly tricky to master. Part of it came naturally, like he'd been flying all his life, but not all of it. Especially when carrying a passenger Zuko had to make a conscious effort to fly straight and not drop anyone.

On the other hand, showing what you were seeing right now wasn't incredibly difficult, so Zuko might have been able to achieve that and flying simultaneously. But he chose not to. Showing images was but a heartbeat away from showing thoughts, and Zuko wasn't sure he could keep those the two separate when he wasn't fully focused on keeping his mental link in check.

Toph trusted him enough to let him take her to places she couldn't see. Zuko knew it wasn't fair of him not to meet Toph's trust halfway and grant her the ability to see. Still, he couldn't do it.

Whenever Zuko trusted, whenever he opened up, he ended up getting hurt. Every time. So he didn't.

Toph grimaced, but nodded. Zuko bent his front legs to allow Toph to clime back on his back. She positioned herself at the foot of his wings, holding on to his neck for support.

Zuko flew up as steadily as he knew how. He scanned the canopy of the near-by stretch of forest. That was where the arrow had come from.

Zuko floated high above the scenery, looking intently for the archer that had set off the explosives. He was already beginning to think the culprit had escaped, but then Zuko saw him. Someone jumping down from a tree. Someone with a quiver.

Ha!

In a flash Zuko swooped down, crashed through the canopy and landed atop the archer, pinning the boy in place with his front paws. And a boy he truly was: much younger than Zuko had anticipated.

Zuko growled and flashed his white teeth. The boy looked too shocked to know how to react.

"Next time: you're going to give me the _heads up_ before doing that!" Toph sounded upset, but she still moved quickly and decisively. She jumped down, oriented herself and turned to looked at Zuko's prey with her milky eyes.

"No other people around. Well, none touching the ground, anyways. Can't voach for all the trees though", Toph informed Zuko.

She turned to the archer: "You're the idiot that just tried to massacre a village? If you are, you better come clean now. I don't think my friend here has patience for lies."

Toph nodded her head towards Zuko when saying the word "friend",

causing the silent archer's eyes widen in surprise. It seemed the boy couldn't still quite believe he'd been attacked by a dragon and a blind midget.

Although normally Zuko, too, preferred to give suspects a change to defence themselves orally before checking the truth from their minds, he, indeed, had no patience right now. So he focused, took a breath and created a mental link.

The boy, Longshot, was a 'freedomfighter'. His leader, Jet, had orchestrated the destruction of the dam with the intent of making any Fire Nation citizens living in the village pay for the actions of their countrymen. But Jet couldn't have done it alone. Not without help from... the Avatar.

Zuko felt numb.

The Avatar had almost killed a town full of people. Of course that hadn't been the Air Nomad's intent: Jet had fooled him into it. Still, that would have made no difference to the dead.

This was Jet's fault, and he would pay for his crimes. But the fault wasn't Jet's alone: it was also the Avatar's, and Zuko's.

No one who had met Prince Zuko could deny he really wanted to capture the Avatar. However, now it was due time Zuko looked more closely at his motivations for wanting to do so.

I have to... I want to capture him because he's a danger to the people of my nation. Also, it's the only way I can prove my worth and go home. Those are my two main motivators, though not in that order of importance. That's all going to have to change.

I'm not sure what exactly would happen if I succeeded in capturing the Avatar anymore. I do know that even if I were allowed to go home, it would by no means win me my Father's unconditional love and acceptance.

Which is why I stopped trying. After almost three years of fruitless search I gave up. Not because capturing the Avatar is impossible, like so many have told me over the years. I gave up because I took my mission with such urgency solely because I wanted to go home, when the reason should've been keeping Fire Nation safe.

I allowed a very slim change of a life in which I didn't have to constantly prove myself get me completely distracted from my mission, and when that turned out to be a dead end, I quit.

_I gave up. _

The Avatar was a danger to the safety of the citizen's of his nation, and those citizen's relied on their prince to keep them safe. A mission Zuko had failed at.

All these years Zuko had pictured the Avatar to be a bitter old airbending master. Aang hadn't matched that image at all, and Zuko had let that lead him into presuming the boy was more or less harmless.

The young Avatar wasn't spitefull by nature, but he was a fool. This

made him only a little less dangerous than what he would have been like had he been out to destroy the Fire Nation.

As far as Zuko knew, the boy didn't want to hurt people. Still, he also clearly didn't put much thought into whether his actions hurt people or not.

Aang didn't hate the Fire Nation, but he didn't care for them either. And with people like Jet and Katara influencing him, he presented a great risk.

It was Zuko's task to capture the Avatar, but he had not even tried his hardest. Not even close. Why? Because he felt sorry for the boy for having to carry such a burden and responsibility at such a young age?

Zuko had had it all wrong. Aang wasn't to be pitied for his lack of experience. He was to be feared for it.

The Avatar's power was great, and anyone not taking that power and its consequences seriously was dangerous.

Zuko had to stop the boy. Not because he wanted to go home; truth be told, Zuko had no idea if that was what he wanted any more. He had to capture the Avatar so that the boy couldn't hurt anyone else ever again.

Where's the Avatar? Zuko pushed through Longshot's hazy memories. The archer didn't know.

Zuko broke the connection.

"Flicker?" Toph asked, breaking Zuko's inner tirade. "Mind filling me in on the latest buzz?"

She deserved to know the truth. Zuko extended a whisker to touch Toph's forehead and briefly explained to her what he'd just found out himself: the orphan gang of 'freedomfighters' and Jet's diabolic plan that included the Avatar as an unwitting accomplice. All of this from Longshot's point of view.

"The Avatar? Wow", Toph wondered. "I'd heard rumours he was back."

Zuko didn't react, so Toph went on: "Okay, so we gotta go find this psycho called Jet and teach him a lesson. Got it. But what are we going to do with this fellow?" Toph nodded towards Longshot, who was still pinned down under Zuko's paw. Still silent.

Zuko hadn't thought about that. To him the archer was in a position equivalent to that of a soldier following orders from his superiors. Jet was the commanding officer, so the responsibility was his.

On the other hand, it wasn't like the boy didn't have a free will. There was always a possibility to choose differently, and sometimes, like in today's case, doing the right thing should have outweighed remaining loyal to your superior.

Suggestions? Zuko asked Toph.

Toph looked thoughtful before saying: "It... depends, I guess."

On?

"Whether he's sorry or not. And whether he'll do something like this again."

The Power of the Dragons could be used to convey memories and thoughts, but determining intentions was nearly impossible. Also, the Power was far from exact science. Such complicated feelings as remorse were difficult to accurately detect, and even if you sensed that a person was remorseful, you couldn't tell what they were sorry for. Anyone would be sorry for having gotten caught and been left alone to take the blame.

Not sure.

Toph turned to address Longshot: "What is it, pumpkin? Are you going to keep going around murdering people at random?"

Toph's tone of voice was nonchalant, almost sugary. Zuko was taken aback at how much she was like Azula when she demonstrated her anger through an intimidating veil of sweetness. He had to remind himself that it was just a misconception, an outer shell. On the inside, Toph was nothing like his sister.

Their prisoner looked solemn but he shook his head, indicating he was done with the killings.

"That's good enough for me. You?" Toph asked Zuko.

Zuko let out a sigh. If the flood had destroyed the village, he would've surely made this fool pay. But it hadn't.

As far as intentions went that changed nothing. Incompetence had nothing to do with accountability. And still, it changed something for Zuko.

He didn't hate the boy. He didn't even feel like he was in a position to preach. Longshot seemed like he had had a hard life and spirits knew Zuko had done his share of stupid mistakes, too. If the boy was truly sorry...

Zuko nodded.

Without a warning, Toph earthbended the archer to the ground. She said: "Well well, it's your lucky day. We're going to let you off easy. Once. But I'm telling you, and I suggest you pass the message along to your idiot buddies: do anything like this again, and there will be consequences. Me and my little dragon here will make sure of that. We will know and, take my word for it, we will find you wherever you're hiding. Got it?"

Longshot nodded.

Toph turned back to Zuko: "Where to next?"

ooo

A few moments earlier

"Impossible!" Jet shouted.

As much as Katara was now repulsed by the thought of having anything in common with the monster iced onto a tree, she had to admit that disbelief was her go-to reaction as well.

Just when all hope seemed to have been lost and the tsunami had been about to wipe out the village, the earth itself had put an end to the madness.

"Was that... earthbending?" Aang wondered. "Wow! Who do you suppose did that?"

Katara turned around and shouted at Jet: "How could you? There are women and _children_ down there!"

"They're all Fire Nation. They're all evil. I thought you of all people would understand."

Katara felt disgusted. She'd trusted Jet. She'd thought he understood. How could this _evil_ thing be the same person she'd gotten to know, gotten to admire?

"Katara", Jet sounded like he was trying to reason with an especially stubborn child, "It's like you said. This is war. We need to get rid of them. We need to make them pay. All of them."

"No!" she shouted back, "You're twisting my words! I didn't want... this!" Katara waved her hands, gesturing pointlessly. There were no words to describe the horror of having almost taken part in drowning children.

"Katara, it's okay", Aang soothed her, "Of course you didn't want any of this to happen. None of us did. But it's alright. The village is fine."

"No!" Katara pivoted around to face Aang, tears threatening to leave her eyes, "It's not okay! He deceived us! He betrayed us! He _used_ us! It's a miracle the village was saved but it doesn't change... it doesn't..."

Now she was outright sobbing. Aang put his arm around her shoulder. For a moment they just stood there like that.

"I should've known you were just like your traitor brother."

Katara turned back towards Jet, shock and anger pushing her tears aside: "What â€" have you done â€" to my brother?"

ooo

I do hope Katara and Aang are okay. And that Jet drowned.

Sokka had tried to convince his captors, Smellerbee and Pipsquick, to put an end to this madness and stop Jet. Or at very least to let him go so that he could warn the village. But it had been to no avail. The 'freedomfighters' had tied Sokka in to a net, carried him into the forrest out of hearing range and stayed to watch over him; just

as their leader had ordered.

Sokka had still been working on his great escape plan when they'd all heard the explosion. And the rumbling of tens of tons of water against ground.

I can't believe it. I'm too late.

After that Sokka had stopped trying to reason with anyone. It didn't really matter now.

Sokka was furious at Jet. And the more he thought about it, he was also angry at himself. Sokka had had a bad feeling about Jet and his 'freedomfighters' the moment they've met, and he really ought to have listened to his instincts. Now a village full of people had met their untimely demise, and Sokka couldn't shake of the the feeling that he could have prevented. If only he had been smarter or stonger. But he wasn't.

And to top it all, Sokka had no idea where Katara and Aang were or even if they were alright.

"Let go of my brother!" a furious voice echoed from above. A voice, and tone, Sokka was very familiar with.

Appa's massive body landed into the little clearing in a whoosh. Atop the bison were his sister and the Avatar. "Katara!"

Smellerbee and Pipsquick lifted their weapons, but they were no match to the power of the Avatar; or to the wrath of an angry babysister.

Katara ran over to Sokka, cut him loose with his own boomerang and caught him in her embrace.

"I'm so sorry I didn't listen to you" she sobbed.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. You would have listened to me if I hadn't been such a jerk earlier."

Katara looked Sokka in the eyes: "Are you alright? Jet made it sound like... like he'd tortured you or something else awful..."

"I'm fine. No damages. It's the village that took the hit", on the last words Sokka's face hardened.

"No it didn't! The village is fine!" Aang exclaimed. "A bunch of earthbenders saved it."

Both siblings blinked at Aang.

"I didn't see a bunch of earthbenders", Katara said earnestly, as Sokka said: "Really? The village is fine?"

"Yeah. It was saved by someone using earthbending", Aang explained, "And it must have been a bunch of earthbenders since I don't think any one bender could have done all that."

"Okay", Sokka slowly said, "The village is fine. That's... great news. What about Jet?"

"You were right about it him all along", Katara said seriously, "I should've listened to you."

"And you'll keep that in mind the next time we disagree on something. But back to the point: Jet?"

"Katara froze him onto a tree", Aang said, "And gave him quite the speech. Don't think he'll be blowing up dams again any time soon."

Sokka nodded, his mind working overtime trying to assess all the information he was receiving. And trying to picture Katara beating the crap out of Jet. What an oddly satisfying thought.

"So, earthbenders, you said?" Sokka couldn't quite figure out what all that ment. "Why would a bunch of earthbenders save a Fire Nation village?"

"Maybe they didn't realize it was a Fire Nation village?" Aang suggested.

"Yeah, totally. It's only on every banner", Sokka pointed out, but added more soothingly: "Though I guess you could be right. And who knows? Maybe they were a bunch of blind earthbenders."

Katara rolled her eyes at the joke and said: "It could've been just selfdefence."

"Maybe", Sokka allowed, "But one way or the other, it doesn't really sound like something the Earth Kingdom Army would do. Or the Militia, for that matter. So maybe we should go meet these earthbenders and see who they are?"

"Yeah!" Aang sounded excited, "And maybe we could ask them to teach me some earthbending!"

ooo

"This is him?" Toph asked.

Flicker growled fiercely, which Toph interpreted as a 'yes'.

The boy tied to a tree by a material Toph couldn't quite name was very quiet. Probably couldn't believe his eyes. His heartbeat was racing, though. Because of anger or fear, Toph couldn't tell for sure.

"You blew up the dam?" Toph didn't doubt Flicker's abilities of recognition. She just wanted to hear the boy admit it.

The boy straightened up. Well, as much as he could straighten up when tied to a tree.

"And what if I did?" Jet asked her back.

"Are you sorry for what you did?" Toph already disliked this freedomfighter more than the previous one, but she wanted to keep her standards equal.

The boy quickly looked over to Flicker and then back to Toph: "I'm sorry it didn't work."

Flicker growled furiously and dashed over to the boy with such ferocity Toph wouldn't have been surprised if the tree had tipped over in the process. The dragon's teeth were inches from the boy's face.

"You... you get this... thing off of me!" Jet half commanded half pleaded. His tough attitude was all gone.

"A: Flicker's not my pet. I don't tell him what to do. B: Gimme one could reason why I should", Toph tried to sound uncaring, but actually she was quite worried.

As much as the guy may have deserved it, Toph didn't really want him to become dragonfood. However, she was pretty sure Flicker was a good dragon and wouldn't do that.

And if he did, Toph would stop him. Somehow.

Something must have caught Flicker's eye, because he lifted his head to look up.

"What is it?" Toph insisted to know. She hated aerial attacks.

The dragon hesitated a moment, but then left Jet's side to come communicate with her. He showed Toph what he saw. Namely, a large animal Toph guessed was the airbison they've ran into earlier flying in the sky. With passengers.

The Avatar, Flicker said, confirming what Toph had already figured out. It only now struck Toph that Flicker may have known the Avatar was around from the moment they've seen the airbison. Maybe he'd even met the Avatar before.

Flicker turned his head back at Jet, and again at the sky. Clearly torn about something.

"What do you wanna do?" Toph asked, referring both to Jet and the bison.

_He _ (a spiteful look at Jet)_ isn't going anywhere, _the dragon eventually decided.

"Okay", Toph had to admit he was more curious to meet the Avatar than this duchback, "But first I need to know: is there something going on between you and this Avatar fellow?"

ooo

Toph's question was simple but the answer was anything but.

How to put a hundred years of enmity from his nation, years of personal pursuit and several battles simply.

Yes.

"Care to elaborate?"

It's nothing personal.

Zuko knew it was his duty to capture the Avatar, the sooner the better. However, he couldn't very well take Toph along, and leaving her far from her home with no means of transportation would be pretty cold, too. Zuko owed Toph too much for it to even be an option to just dump her whenever her company became inconvenient.

Also, Zuko liked Toph. Too bad Toph wouldn't probably like Zuko when she found out who he really was and whose side he was on.

Toph sighed in frustration: "Fine. At least tell me if he's going to attack you on sight or something."

Zuko considered that for a while. He really didn't know. If Prince Zuko showed up out of the blue, the Avatar and his companions would surely go on the defensive, maybe even offensive. Then again they wouldn't know him like this. Only Sokka would recognize him and they had parted as... acquaintances.

Only one way to find out. I'll be back soon.

"Oh no you won't..." was all Zuko had time to hear before the gushing of the air drowned out Toph's voice.

ooo

Commander Zhao was getting frustrated. It was obvious that Zuko was somewhere following a lead on the Avatar, and the only part about the situation that still mystified Zhao was why he wasn't somewhere doing the same.

The old man is waisting my time. I wouldn't even put up with his tea and nonsense if it weren't for the fact that he was once an esteemed general and is still one of the greatest strategiests of our nation. Unlike his idiot nephew, General Iroh might still prove useful to me one day.

"Oh my, look at the sun. Time flies when you're having..." Zhao tried hard to think of something mildly insulting but relatively corteous, "Tea."

"Well, it looks like Zuko's going to be out late. Who knows, maybe he's met a nice Earth Kingdom girl and is unwilling to leave her behind, if you catch my drift", Iroh said in a conspirational tone and wincked at Zhao.

Zhao had to fight back the urge to roll his eyes_. Well that's really unlikely and he knows it as well as I do._

ooo

"Well, I'm not seeing a bunch of bulky earthbenders. You?" Sokka retorted to his companions, "What about you, Momo? You seeing anything interesting."

The lemur had been grooming himself, but he looked up from his seat at the sound of his name.

"Yeah" Aang admitted, obviously disappointed. They could all see the

impressive formation of earth that had saved the village, but no earthbenders were in sight. It was just too bad. Aang really would've liked to learn how to earthbend like that. "I guess we should just call it quits and continue our journey...Wait. What is it Momo? What are you pointing at?"

Momo had suddenly began squeaking and gesturing furiously at something. All the children turned to look.

It took a moment before Aang recognized the black creature slithering their way in the air.

"Wow! A dragon!" he exclaimed, "It's really rare to meet those, especially this far from the Fire Nation."

Appa bellowed a low 'humph' and sped up its pace.

"No wait", Aang pulled at the bison's reins, "Let's go take a closer look."

Appa kept flying into the opposite direction.

"Aang, are you sure its safe to go take a closer look?" Katara sounded worried.

"Hey, wait. I've already met that dragon. It was... okay. For a dragon", Sokka said thoughtfully.

Katara turned to stare at his brother: "What do you mean you've already met that dragon? When?"

"When I was running from the Militia. I told you about that."

"No, you didn't", Aang pointed out.

"I'm pretty sure I... No. Wait. You're right. I didn't", Sokka realized. "Though I totally would've if you hadn't been so busy not talking to me."

"Here it comes", Aang said.

The dragon had reached them, but it had swooped to their left side, still keeping a respectable distance. The dragon was small, a lot smaller than Roku's dragon had been. It's long body twisted in the air, and its black scales reflected tints of sunlight.

"You heard what Sokka said, Appa. The dragon is friendly. Yep, yep", Aang reasoned, but the bison didn't react to his master's commands.

Suddenly the dragon flapped its wings quickly and dived down, passing below them and then rising back up to their level on the other side.

"Look! It wants to play!" Aang said.

"Aang, I don't like this", Katara said. She was looking at the dragon intently.

In another sudden movement the dragon approached them. For a moment

Aang thought it would come close enough to touch, but then Appa turned around to face the dragon and growled at it, forcing it to dive steeply up to avoid impact.

"Wow, Appa! What are you doing?"

"Aang! What do dragons eat?" Sokka asked while holding on to Appa's saddle tighter so as not to fall when the bison had kept turning around in the air, not letting the dragon from his sight.

"Um, fish?" Aang tried.

"Do you see any fish around?" Katara asked.

"What are you saying...? Wait. It's not trying to eat Appa! It wouldn't. And Appa is way too big for it."

"What about us?" Katara sounded serious.

"No, they're not like that", Aang tried to remember what the monks had taught him about dragons, "Oh, right. Now I remember. The big ones do sometimes attack skybison. But this one is just a cub."

"And now he says it", Sokka muttered, "No wonder Appa's acting out."

"What do you mean by the _big ones_?" Katara asked.

"Hey, that's exactly what I said..." was all Sokka had time to say when the dragon suddenly came back for another round.

It first halted for a moment, staying behind. Then it flew closer and closer to them from behind.

Appa spiraled in the air and created a wave of air with his tail. The wind hit the dragon hard and pushed it back. The dragon span uncontrollably through the air a good distance before regaining its balance.

"Wait!" Sokka shouted. "The dragon was kind of nice to me the last time we met. It sort of saved me. And other people. I don't think it's attacking!"

"Yeah, like I've been saying from the get-go. It just wants to play." Aang wished he still had his glider so that he could've gone to play with the dragon. Maybe even ride it!

ooo

Zuko had to admit this wasn't one of his better-thought-out plans. It may even make it in the bottom ten. Even if he somehow managed to get past the 'docile' bison and snatch the Avatar, then what? Fly back to the Fire Nation and into the Fire Palace, hand the Air Nomad over and then come back to pick up Toph as he'd promised? If there was someone more unwelcome in the Fire Nation than a banished prince, a dragon just might be it.

Yeah, definitely in the bottom ten.

His new-found determination was already lacking. He wasn't in his 'I

must capture the Avatar' mode but more like in a 'I really ought to capture the Avatar' mode. The difference was tangible.

Zuko didn't often admit defeat, but this time it appeared he had no choice but to let the Avatar go.

Truth be told, a rational part of Zuko had been telling him this was pointless all along. The voice of reason had been drowned out by his more adventurous side, which he didn't usually follow when he was human.

Zuko turned back. Although he had to once again admit he'd been unable to capture the Avatar, he would've been lying if he'd said there wasn't a part of him that had thoroughly enjoyed his little attempt nonetheless.

Zuko had grown up fast, so he didn't know much about playing games (the kinds Azula played didn't count), but he could imagine this was something like that. Flying was sort of fun, but it was even better with some challenge thrown in to make things interesting. Ten tons of challenge.

A more serious, human part of Zuko was shouting out protests as he made his way back towards where he'd left Toph and Jet, but the dragon part had a stronger case. As much as it pained him to let the airbender disappear from his sight, knowing full well he'd soon have to track him down again, there was no practical way he was going to pull this off. Not today.

Zuko landed softly. Or so he attempted to do, but this was made more or less impossible by the shifting earth under his paws.

"FIY, friends don't leave friends behind and go have fun by themselves."

Okay, Toph's angry. Nothing surprising there. But how did she know where I was about to land?

ooo

Half an hour later

Flicker landed and Toph jumped down. They were back on the clearing where they'd first met.

Flying wasn't as bad now that she'd gotten a bit more used to it, but she was still a long way from enjoying it. She felt instantly better being reunited with her element.

They had barely exchanged a few words on their way back. Toph was still pretty bitter at the dragon for leaving her behind like that, but it wasn't the main reason for her silence. The real reason was that she knew he would leave soon, and Toph wasn't ready to say goodbye just yet.

"Copper coin for your thoughts", Toph said to break the silence.

Still not sure if we should've left Jet there.

Toph understood what he meant: "Yeah, I know. But if the treatment we gave him didn't turn him around, I don't know what will. What else could have we done, short from killing him?"

Hand him to the Fire Nation?

"I said short from killing him."

After Flicker had returned from his bison hunt they'd spent a few more moments letting Jet know why blowing up dams was a really bad idea. Toph wasn't sure if any of it had actually gotten through to the boy: he was really dedicated to his twisted view of the world. But even if it hadn't exactly turned him into a Fire Nation fan, it hopefully had at least taught Jet some healthy fear and respect.

The silence stretched on for a while longer. Toph didn't need to be an awesome earthbender to know Flicker was getting anxious.

Toph was earth. She was used to facing her problems head-on. Well, most of her problems, anyway.

"Before you go, would you answer a question of mine? See, I often come up with nicknames for people and address them with those rather than their real names. However usually I do know those names, or at least learn them pretty soon when people ask me to call them by their actual names. It didn't escape me that you never told me your real name. I'm sure you had your reasons, but... could you tell me anyway?"

The dragon hesitated only for a short moment before communicating a single word: _ Zuko._

"Zuko. Cool."

I really am sorry that I left you behind back there.

"I know. Too bad not so sorry you wouldn't leave again", Toph felt childish saying out loud how much she hated the thought of losing her only friend. She was so not going to cry. She was tougher than that.

Zuko came closer, but instead of communicating anything, he just nuzzled her with his snout. Toph hugged him back, and for a moment they just stood there like that.

Eventually Flicker said: _I have to go. Uncle is waiting._

"Go", Toph said with a small smile on her face. She could do this.

Flicker had already turned his head towards the sky when he lowered it one last time, saying: _I'd like to promise we'll meet again, but I can't. But if you'd like it to happen, I can promise to try._

Toph felt something choke up in her throat, so instead of speaking she simply nodded.

Then he was gone.

ooo

Iroh was standing at the rail of the ship admiring the setting sun. His tea session with the commander had been... unnerving, was perhaps the right word. Zhao hadn't exactly revealed his cards, but Iroh was now sure the man was willing to play a very dangerous game to gain more power. In fact Iroh feared there was almost no limit to what the commander was capable of.

Suddenly a shadow passed over Iroh. He looked up, and briefly saw something landing onto a rocky cliff not far from where they were. Something dark and long. If he didn't know better...

The creature moved again, disappearing behind a few trees even closer to where the ship was docked.

Iroh looked around himself to make sure no one else had noticed anything. The few crewmen on the deck appeared to be busy doing their usual chores, not paying any special attention to their surroundings.

It could be a spirit. It could be something to do with Zuko.

That was all the convincing Iroh needed to go for a brisk evening walk. Right now.

ooo

In a few minutes Iroh reached the area he thought he'd seen something land in. He looked around and listened carefully. There was a possibility he was walking into a trap.

Suddenly a black figure with wide wings landed before him. Iroh's first instinct had been right. He was facing a dragon. A real dragon even, not a spirit.

Here I thought there were only two left.

But there was more to the feeling of recognition than just knowing what species you were looking at. The dragon was familiar.

Iroh looked the dragon in the eye, only to meet a very familiar shade of gold.

"Zuko?"

Suddenly the young dragon was engulfed by flames flickering in every colour of the rainbow. For a moment it was too bright for Iroh to see what was going on, but still the flames weren't hot. Not hot enough to burn.

The fire died out as suddenly as it had ignited. Where moments ago there had been a dragon now stood his nephew. The teenager looked exactly the way he had when Iroh had last seen him. He even had the same clothes on.

Iroh was shocked. Still he immediately hurried over to hug his nephew. And for once, Zuko didn't shake him off.

Instead the boy whispered: "I'm sorry."

17. Almost Human

17. Almost Human

"What do you mean the engine is not working?"

Iroh was a little taken aback by the next words that came out of his nephew's mouth. A boy that age really should not have known that many colorful expressions. As his primary educator, Iroh felt a twinge of guilt for this.

The crew member tasked with the ungrateful job of telling the prince why they weren't moving looked more or less terrified even though Zuko's curses weren't directed at him. Much more terrified than a soldier being lectured by an angry superior usually did.

Iroh had noticed similar behavior from crew members earlier as well, but he had so far dismissed it as he himself being overly attentive and cautious since he knew the circumstances better. Still, especially of late, there really was no denying that the crew had begun acting slightly differently in his nephew's presence. This Iroh found more worrisome than foul language from a teenager.

_The others don't even know what my nephew is, but they can instinctively sense he's to be feared and respected. That he isn't entirely human. _

Iroh had lately re-read everything he knew about dragons and most stories described that dragons caused a great awe in people. Having been face to face with two of the last dragons in the world, Iroh knew that to be true. However, Zuko didn't appear to be fully aware of the effect he was having on people around him.

I'll have to have a word about this with him as soon as... as soon as I find the right words.

"I'm sure we're doing everything we can to get us moving again in no time", Iroh put in and excused the crew member with a nod. The man looked nothing short of relieved.

Zuko turned to Iroh: "But didn't you not two moments ago tell me that you think there's a big storm coming? What happened to heading for safe harbor as soon as possible?"

Iroh had indeed said that and he did indeed believe so. However, Zuko worrying over the storm now wouldn't get the ship fixed any faster. And it might intimidate the crew.

"Oh well, I could be wrong about that. And I don't think the engine falling apart is anything to get too upset over. This is an old ship. It's bound to have its quirks", Iroh tried to reassure his nephew. Zuko had a serious look on his face, making him look years older than he actually was.

Finally Zuko stopped pinching the bridge of his nose, sighed and replied: "Fine. But as soon as the engine is operational again, we'll head for shore. I'm going to go check on how the repairs are coming along."

And like that, Zuko walked away and disappeared into the ships hull.

ooo

Three days earlier

"I'm sorry", Zuko whispered in Iroh's ear.

"There there", was all Iroh managed back as a reply. It was hard to find better words when he wasn't entirely sure what Zuko was apologizing for.

For leaving without a word? Zuko's disappearance had caused Iroh much worry, but of course he'd forgive his nephew. Zuko's path was not an easy one, and Iroh knew he had to be patient with the boy. Some wounds took long to heal, and opening them up the way they'd been torn open in the reunion with Ursa must have been exceptionally trying.

For being... a dragon? Uncle wasn't sure how to feel about that unexpected revelation, but he was certain it wasn't his place to condemn or absolve anyone.

All in all, it was incredibly unusual for Zuko to apologize. The young man had his pride, and Uncle wasn't the one to insist to hear it out loud that Zuko was sorry. He knew the boy well enough to know that he often was, and that was enough. But now Zuko had to be really upset to open up like this.

Iroh still didn't know what to say. Everything was happening too fast for his head to keep up with. He tried to focus his thoughts.

Zuko was back, and he was unharmed. Those were the things that really mattered.

Only a moment ago his nephew had been in the form of a black dragon. Iroh suddenly recalled the spiritual presence he'd sensed on the moors where he'd searched for his nephew. It had to be somehow connected to this turn of events. It and the encounter Zuko had had with a dragon spirit a day earlier.

For a moment Iroh felt irrational anger towards the spirits. His nephew had had a very hard life, and still the spirits seemed intend on complicating it even further. It wasn't fair for Zuko to have to carry such heavy responsibilities at such a young age. Why couldn't they just leave him alone, even for a while? Why couldn't they let him be happy?

Iroh took a deep breath to calm himself. Now was no time for him to loose his temper. Zuko needed him to be calm and understanding and there for him. If he'd express irritation, Zuko would undoubtedly interpret it as being directed at him. Zuko had been raised to presume all the bad things in the world were his fault, and more worries was the last thing his nephew needed right now.

"It's alright", Uncle added reassuringly.

"No... you don't know... don't understand..." Zuko, too, seemed to be struggling to find the right words.

Zuko's stand didn't appear quite stable, so Iroh guided him down to sit under an evergreen tree. Zuko, who usually fought back all attempts of nurturing, didn't resist. Uncle sat next to his nephew and forced an understanding smile on his face.

"I'm just glad you returned. I was very worried. We all were", Iroh needed Zuko to know returning was never a bad idea, no matter in what state he was in. He'd always have a place to come back to, and someone to talk to in Iroh.

"I... I shouldn't have left you like that. I knew you'd worry. I just... didn't think it through", Zuko said in a rush.

"I understand", Uncle reassured him, "We all sometimes need time alone. But I hope you know you don't have to fight your fights all by yourself. I will always be here for you."

Zuko swallowed hard and nodded. He wasn't meeting Iroh eye to eye.

"Zuko", Iroh began gently, "What happened?"

His nephew closed his eyes and shook his head. He unconsciously rubbed the back of his neck.

"Start from the beginning", Iroh urged.

Zuko took a deep breath and began: "I... Tuli, you know, the spirit I met?" (Iroh nodded to express he remembered) "I had to get out. And I left and she was there. She'd said she would. She said she wanted to help. And then I... wasn't me any more. And I left. I flew away."

Iroh nodded. Although this was not the best-told story of all times, not even by his nephew's standards, he thought he understood what Zuko was getting at. He had many questions but Iroh didn't want to interrupt him now that he'd gotten Zuko talking.

"A lot happened after that. I ran into the Earth Kingdom Militia. And the Order. And the Avatar. And this girl Toph."

Iroh's brows lifted. That was ever the more unexpected, and raised far more questions than it answered. _Patience_, Iroh told himself.

Usually, the main problem with Zuko's stories was his tendency to downplay everything. Thus Iroh presumed _a lot_ had indeed happened during these past few days.

"It's my fault Azulon died", Zuko added out of the blue.

"Of course it wasn't", Iroh stated back. He had no idea where this was coming from, but it was important Zuko was corrected. "Many unfortunate things have happened in our family, but I'm sure none of them are your fault. Certainly not Azulon's death. He died in his sleep when you were ten."

Unless... that's not what happened at all.

Iroh had not been in the Fire Nation at the time of his father's death. He hadn't even seen Azulon face to face for years before that for he had been holding Ba Sing Se under siege. The word of his father's passing hadn't even reached Iroh until a few weeks after the fact, for he had been on a quest of his own after what had happened to Lu Ten.

Azulon had left the thrown for Ozai in his will, and Iroh had accepted his father's wishes. Partially, because he hadn't felt up for leading a country himself. Not after he'd shown such poor judgment at Ba Sing Se. With devastating consequences.

For the first time in the conversation, Zuko looked Iroh in the eye: "The night Azulon... died, we went to meet him. Father and Ursa and Azula and I."

Ursa. Not mother?

"After that Father stayed behind to talk to him. And Azula and I hid behind a curtain to eavesdrop."

Iroh could picture that. Undoubtedly_ my niece's idea._

"And we heard... Azulon was angry with Father. He thought he'd been... insensitive about... about what had happened at Ba Sing Se."

Zuko was careful not to mention Lu Ten.

"Azulon wanted to teach Father a lesson. About loss."

Iroh couldn't believe what he was hearing. Surely this was not going to the direction he thought it was...

"What did Azulon say?" Iroh tone was a bit harsher than he'd liked, but he couldn't help it.

"I don't know. I didn't stay to listen", Zuko replied with the monotonic tone he'd been using so far. Then he hesitated for a moment before continuing: "But Azula did. And she said... that grandfather had ordered Father to kill me."

Iroh felt a fire burning his veins. _They couldn't have...used his nephew's life as a token in their power games!_

Ozai had later showcased that he cared little of what became of Zuko, but Azulon? This had to be a misunderstanding.

And yet Zuko must have been suspecting this for years. And not once had he shared his doubts with Uncle. Probably because it was too awful to believe in.

Suddenly Iroh remembered what Ursa had said: _I did something wrong, something bad. But I did it because I love you, both you and your sister, very much._

When Zuko had found out from Zhao's mind that his mother had been banished, he hadn't given any reasons as to why. Iroh had wondered about that but had let it pass. It hadn't seemed right to blacken Ursa's memory by dwelling on her possible sins.

Iroh turned to hold Zuko by the shoulder to get his full attention: "Whatever happened that night, it was not your fault. Do you understand?"

Zuko looked surprised for a moment. Hesitantly he asked: "You're not... angry with me?"

Iroh hugged his nephew again. "Of course not."

Zuko abruptly pulled back, more worry shadowing his face: "You're not going to... It wasn't mother's fault, either. It wasn't."

Iroh would have been lying to himself if he'd said he wasn't feeling an irrational resentment towards Ursa. But he understood. He really did. There was very little he himself wouldn't have done to keep Lu Ten safe.

That's what any parent who cared would do.

"No, it wasn't", Iroh agreed solemnly.

For a moment they just sat in silence. Then Iroh noticed the shadows around them had grown very tall, the sun having almost set. There was still much for them to talk about, but it would be safer to do that aboard their ship.

"About this whole... dragon business", Iroh began, "I still expect to hear a more detailed summary."

Zuko nodded.

"But first things first: you look starved. Let's get you back to the ship", Iroh got up and offered a hand to pull Zuko up, too.

The boy hesitated for a moment: "The crew?"

"As far as they're concerned you've been out looking for the Avatar. As far as I'm concerned that is all they need to know for now. The truth might be a little... hard to explain."

Not to mention dangerous, if the wrong people were to learn what his nephew had been up to. Or what he'd become.

Iroh had for a long time considered himself somewhat an expert in both matters of spirits and matters of dragons, but even he was at a loss over what was going on with his nephew. He'd really need to do some reading and asking around to find out more. Also, Iroh just might have to go back on a promise he'd once given to never tell anyone that the last of the great dragons weren't dead.

Perhaps that promise of silence could be seen to only apply to other humans.

Zuko nodded and took Uncle's hand: "We _are_ still after the Avatar. Just so you know."

That was... a bit unexpected, considering what they had just found out of Ozai. Iroh knew that a bond between a father and a son was not one easily broken, but it still seemed unlikely that that mutual

respect was the reason for Zuko's newly re-gained interest in catching the Avatar. Thinking it quickly over Iroh was sure Zuko must have had his own reasons. They would discuss those reasons in due time.

What matters is that he's back.

"Then I shall inform the crew that we'll be heading north first thing in the morning?"

Zuko nodded. They began walking side by side down the narrow path that had led Iroh to Zuko.

"It's a ten minute walk to the ship", Iroh casually pointed out, and added less casually: "Plenty of time for you to tell me what this dragon business was all about."

"Still is, probably", Zuko corrected, and added after seeing the look on his uncle's face, "I mean, I got the impression that turning into a dragon wasn't a one-time thing."

Oh dear. How was Zuko able to take all this so calmly?

Maybe I'm just getting too old for this.

ooo

The present

Iroh was walking down a narrow staircase leading to the engine room. He didn't bother knocking on the door, nor was he surprised to find his nephew there next to the ship's old boiler. What was a bit unexpected was that Zuko was down here by himself. _I would've expected the repairs to be underway by now._

"Prince Zuko, you asked to see me", Iroh greeted.

Zuko nodded and smiled briefly before his face turned serious and focused again: "Thank you for coming so soon. There's something here I want you to see."

Iroh walked closer to see what his nephew had gestured towards. A moment past in silence as the older man examined the damaged part of the engine.

"Well?" Zuko eventually hurried him, "What do you think?"

Iroh was thoughtful: "The damage appears to be rather extensive. Fixing it could take a while. But on a brighter note I don't think we'll need such spare parts that aren't available to us, which means we won't be stranded indefinitely."

"Is that all?"

What more should I be seeing? And how does all this play together with us being alone down here?

Iroh looked again, this time looking specifically for something that might explain his nephew's odd behavior. Then he saw it.

"Well, I'm not an engineer and my understanding of combustion engines is limited at best, but if I didn't know better, I'd say this damage doesn't look like it was caused by natural corrosion."

Zuko nodded: "That's exactly what I thought. I have only little training in mechanics, but after having spent nearly three years on this old ship, I've learned a thing or two about the numerous ways something can fall apart out of sheer age. This doesn't look like it did."

"The alternative being that someone purposefully helped it along", Iroh concluded what Zuko was getting at, "Do you have someone in mind?"

Zuko's eyes darkened: "No. And I would appreciate if the contents of this conversation remained between us for now."

Iroh nodded: "That seems wise if we do not wish to alarm the saboteur."

"That too, but mainly I don't like the idea of jumping the gun on this thing should it turn out my suspicions were unfounded. The crew... I don't know them well enough to know whether one of them would do this or not, but after they have followed me loyally for this long, I'd hate to start pointing any fingers before I have some solid proof that we do have a saboteur on board."

Zuko has grown significantly in the space of a few weeks. He's much more aware of and considerate towards other people's feelings. Also, despite what he told me earlier, I have a strong feeling he's more lenient towards the idea that capturing the Avatar isn't the most important thing in the world. When I told him I had a hunch a storm was coming and we should prioritize finding shelter over keeping up the chase, he didn't even try to argue with me on the matter. He's obviously not as determined and sure about his hunt as he used to be.

I'm not sure what exactly has brought this on, but these are good signs nonetheless. The sad thing is that I doubt Zuko himself notices or appreciates how much he's changed.

"Do you suspect that this saboteur is working alone?" Iroh decided to stay on the topic at hand for now. The Talk could wait a little longer.

"No. You said Zhao came around looking for me a few days ago. I don't suppose there's any chance he would've had access to the engine room?"

"No. I didn't let him out of my sight and I told the crew to keep an eye on his men. Also, I seriously doubt Commander Zhao knows enough about engines that he could've rigged ours to fall apart three days later."

Zuko nodded. Iroh went on: "That isn't to say that the Commander shouldn't be our number one suspect. He would certainly have the will and perhaps even the means to pull something like this off. That man cares nothing for the concept of fair play. It simply means that if Zhao is behind this, he isn't working alone."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

Zuko weighed his options before answering: "You're right. We can't be sure that this isn't all just a freaky coincidence or a fluke of bad luck; spirits know we've been in no short supply of both aboard this ship. But we'd be foolish not to consider the possibility that someone on board this ship is in fact working consciously towards sabotaging my quest. The real question is: why now? We're, quite literally, in the same boat. If a storm hits us with its full force before we fix the engine, the saboteur will be in exactly as much trouble as the rest of us."

"I thought about that, too", Iroh allowed, "The timing could be inconsequential. If someone was under orders to slow us down any way he can, it's possible he simply saw an opportunity and took it. Also, I suspect not everyone on board was as convinced by my talent in forecasting the weather as you were. It's quite possible the saboteur wasn't counting on a dangerous weather phenomenon to occur during the relatively short time it will take us to fix the ship."

Zuko nodded again. The boy looked reserved and thoughtful in a way that Iroh couldn't quite put his finger on, so he asked: "What do you plan to do next?"

His nephew sighed: "Not much I can do. For now I'll need to supervise the repairs and, in the mean while, try gather as much information on the situation as I can."

Iroh's face fell. Zuko looked surprised by his uncle's reaction until he finally realized how what he'd just said could be interpreted: "Oh no, not like that. I meant I'd gather information by keeping my eyes and ears open for suspicious behavior and by talking with crew members. Only conventional methods of gathering information, I promise."

ooo

"So, um, what's up?"

The mood in the room immediately turned into an awkward one at Prince Zuko's attempt at casual conversation.

Okay, small talk is definitely not one of the kid's strongest suits.

Seaman Oki had been working on repairing the engine with two other crew members, Seamen Xu and Li. The young Prince was also there, apparently to supervise the process.

The situation was unusual. As far as Oki knew the kid had no training or special interest in mechanics. Usually he was busy training firebending or looking for the Avatar. It certainly wasn't like him to 'hang' with his crew for the sake of being social. Oki couldn't help but to get the feeling that something was going on.

Truth be told, the Prince had been acting a little... off ever since he'd come back from his latest trip to find the Avatar. Or more precisely from when he'd come back from being missing.

A few days ago it had been obvious from General Iroh's behavior that

the old man didn't know where the Prince was or when he'd be coming back. Now everyone, especially Iroh, was acting like the boy's disappearance had been scheduled beforehand and nothing out of the ordinary. It was all a bit strange. Even stranger than usual.

"Well", Seaman Xu got his act together the fastest, "the repairs should take at least a few more hours, sir."

Xu had the most training in engineering of all the crew, so Oki was going to take his word for it. The rumor had it he'd been a Special Engineer in the Royal Navy before he'd messed up some crucial new ship design and got demoted into the rank of a Seaman and put on this mission.

Oki wasn't sure how much of the rumor was true, but the general idea sounded convincing. _I guess we all must have made our share of mistakes before we got put on _this_ assignment._

Not that Oki was complaining. Sure, they had sailed some dangerous waters without any hope of backup, and you never got to go home, but other than that there really were worse missions to get dumped on. At least while serving under Prince Zuko they weren't expected to conquer enemy strongholds or take part in dangerous battles.

Well, at least that's how it had been before they had actually found the Avatar. The mission was bound to get more dangerous now, although the Prince had turned out much more... reasonable about his hunt than any of them would've dared to even hope.

Everyone knew the boy wanted nothing more than his honor returned to him and a quick trip home, but so far he hadn't asked them to do anything stupid or insanely risky to reach that goal. The crew had pretty much been dropping Zuko and Iroh off at various locations to go look for or fight the Avatar. Since that first encounter, none of them had even been close enough to action to see the Avatar, let alone expected to help in his capturing.

Either Zuko thinks we're too incompetent to be of any use or, in his own way, he cares about us.

Either way, Oki wasn't complaining. Things could've been much worse, especially considering how foolhardy the boy had been in the start. Most of the trip, to be more accurate, but apparently he'd finally gotten more sense with age.

"So, is this kind of thing usual?" Zuko tried to keep up the conversation. Maybe his uncle had been right all along when he kept telling everyone the boy was just going through a really difficult age.

"It's not unusual", Xu explained, "although there's usually something specific that pushes the engine past its comfort zone before this kind of breakdown occurs. Though I suppose it is possible that the few day wait, which we haven't had often, cooled the engine too much, and returning back to full speed was more than it could handle."

Zuko's eyes narrowed slightly. The expression was barely noticeable, but it still sent chills down Oki's spine.

Seaman Li, who'd been trying to bang a damaged piece of the engine back into shape, lost his focus and accidentally hit his thumb with the hammer, yelping in pain.

After that they worked in silence for a while. Every now and then Xu gave directions to Li and Oki and told them he wanted to check a few more things here and there.

"Seamen Xu", Zuko suddenly began again, "Those scrapes at the right side of the engine; what do you think could have caused them?"

Xu looked thoughtfully at the point the younger man was gesturing at: "Not sure, sir. Any number of things, really."

"Kind of look like claw marks", Li pointed out, then remembered the Prince's presence and added with a gulp: "Sir."

Oki looked at the damage. There really were a few scratches on the side of the engine that looked new. Normally he would've dismissed it as nothing, but then again the Prince seemed interested. Was that the reason why he was here with them?

The silence stretched on again until Oki's curiosity got the best of him. He wanted to know what was really going on, and he had a feeling it was something to do with Prince Zuko's disappearance. Too bad the only person who had the answers was the boy himself, and this was the kind of topic that was dangerous ground near the boy on the best of days. Oki tried to phrase his words carefully: "Um, sir. I was just wondering: any luck finding the Avatar on your latest... search?"

Nine times out of ten it wasn't a good idea to bring up the Avatar, especially the fact that the airbender was still evading capture, around Prince Zuko, but Oki was dying to know where Zuko had been.

Oki lifted his gaze, preparing for a possible outburst. To his relief the Prince didn't look angry, only thoughtful, as if he, too, was weighing his words carefully.

"I don't trust in my luck, but I will capture the Avatar", the boy finally said. His eyes burned in a way that told Oki to drop the matter, so he did. _So much for those answers._

"I think we should check the ventilation one more time before moving ahead with this", Xu said to him. Oki nodded.

"Are you sure?" The Prince suddenly put in.

Xu took a breath and turned fully to look at the younger man: "I understand we are in a hurry, sir, but this has to be done right or it will break down again soon, and maybe even worse than this."

Oki admired the way Xu kept his cool in the face of agitated Zuko.

"There is nothing wrong with the pipes", Zuko stated.

"With all due respect, sir, I know what I'm doing. It's not my

competence I'm worried about."

_And _that_ could be interpreted in a lot of ways..._

The Prince's eyes narrowed fully. He stared at Xu from under his brows and his stand formed into a slight crouch as if he was about to charge. Xu looked taken aback, his stand straightening in return. It looked like sparks would start flying any moment now.

Then the Prince took a breath, closed his eyes and said: "As you were."

After that he stormed out of the room without another word.

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All in all, this wasn't as good a hiding place as I originally thought it would be, Zuko thought to himself as he held the Avatar's airstaff in his hands. It had crossed his mind to check if the stick still was where he'd left it.

Uncle had volunteered to watch over the repairs for now, leaving Zuko time to gather evidence. And to calm himself, which was why he had come down here.

Ever since Uncle had chosen to buy the two birds they'd traveled on in the Earth Kingdom, the animal compartment of the ship had been packed beyond what it'd been designed for. Comodo-rhinos and ostrich-horses didn't exactly get along, but at least they hadn't gotten into big fights yet. Each animal had a separate stall, but when animals really wanted to take it out on one another a small fence wouldn't have stopped them.

_What do you know, maybe the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom can get along despite all our differences. _

Zuko had come to this section of the ship many times before when he wanted to be alone. Thanks to the general smell, no one else came here to hang out, which made it one of the only places on board the ship besides his own room where he could have some privacy. A place where he could calm down and think things through.

Today, however, the mood in the room was less than calming. The animals appeared to be nervous, and Zuko's attempts to calm them down had been less than useful. It was almost as if they were... afraid of him.

Great. Them too.

When Zuko had decided to hide the Avatar's airstaff, this place had felt like an obvious choice. Plenty of dark corners and other hiding places. If the smell wasn't enough to make people think twice about searching this place, the comodo-rhinos scared most people into thinking better of it. They weren't exactly hostile by nature, but you had to know how to handle large animals for it to be entirely safe to go near them.

Of course, in retrospect, the Avatar not only knew how to handle large animals but he also appeared to be quite fond of animals in

general. If he wasn't too scared about meeting a dragon, he wouldn't have had a problem with a comodo-rhino.

With my luck, Aang would've stayed here just to pat a few comodo-rhinos and then stumbled upon the staff hidden behind one of the vents in the ceiling.

When Zuko had confiscated the staff during their first encounter, he hadn't fully understood how important it was to the Air Nomad. He had presumed it was an object that was useful in a fight but that had primarily sentimental value to its owner, but now he realized that even more importantly, the staff represented freedom.

An Air Nomad can fly with this thing, and despite what Toph said, there's nothing quite like flying to get your mind of worries.

Although the Avatar didn't appear to ever worry about anything, Zuko suspected that wasn't really the case. More likely scenario was that the boy was trying to avoid facing up to his responsibilities because he knew that when he finally did, there was a good chance he'd still be taking care of those same responsibilities when he was old and gray. If he ever lived to be that old in the first place.

Zuko had had similar worries at the beginning of his quest. However, although many had considered capturing the Avatar an impossible task, Zuko had never given up hope. _When you decide that something is impossible is the moment you've ensured you'll never be able to pull it off. _

The Avatar's young age didn't excuse his behavior. The boy's goal appeared to be saving the world, but he didn't have any idea how to do that or even what he wanted the world to be like after it had been safe.

_The same as it was a hundred years ago? What kind of solution is that? There's no erasing the progress that has taken place while the Avatar wasn't around. The Fire Nation wouldn't, couldn't just fall back to its old ways. _

Someone really ought to knock some sense into that kid before he does something irreparable. He has to be stopped, and who better to do that than the banished Prince of Fire Nation who's spent three years preparing for that very task?

In order to fulfill his part in all of this, Zuko would have to find the Avatar as soon as possible. And in order to do that, he had to find out who was sabotaging his ship.

So enough with hiding. Zuko walked out of the animal compartment, the airstaff still in his hand.

He went over one more time what he'd learned so far.

There maybe was a saboteur aboard his ship. If there was a saboteur it had to be someone who was still here. That left Zuko with 22 suspects, presuming it hadn't been he himself or Uncle. And presuming that there wasn't a stowaway aboard... It seemed unlikely on a ship this size, but Zuko couldn't rule the possibility out right. So he'd have to look into that.

All crew members had access to the engine room. Kind of silly, looking at it in retrospect. Might have to do something about that in the future.

Seaman Xu knew the most about engines, but then again one didn't have to be an engineer to know how to destroy engines. Again something that ruled no one out. On the other hand Xu hadn't mentioned he'd suspected sabotaging, and Zuko would've thought he of all people would have been able to tell. So either Zuko was wrong and there was no saboteur, or Xu had made a mistake and hadn't noticed the signs, or Xu was the saboteur and was now trying to cover it up.

Once again speculation. Zuko had no proof one way or the other.

Then Zuko almost ran into someone, his years of battle training the only thing that prevented the collision as Zuko ducked to the side on the last minute. He really ought to watch where he was going.

"Hey watch it!" a soldier shouted before realizing who he was talking to and quickly added: "I mean, we didn't see you coming, sir."

Zuko was irritated but most of the things that irritated had nothing to do with these two crew members. Well, most likely.

Zuko nodded, his way of acknowledging their apology. Actually, now that they were here, Zuko might as well put them into good use.

"Sergeant Jiri, you're in charge of maintenance, are you not?" Zuko inquired.

"Um, yes sir", the soldier replied, sounding a bit weary.

"So you move around a lot during the day, and know where everyone is."

"Yes. Are you looking for someone?"

Yes. "No. I was just wondering if you knew who all have been down in the engine room today."

The soldier looked puzzled only for a moment before replying: "Not off the top of my head, no, but I can ask around, if you'd like me to."

"I would", Zuko said and nodded to dismiss the man. Then he turned to address the other soldier on the corridor, who looked like he had hoped he'd gotten dismissed too: "Seaman I have a task for you. I want you to go over the ship, room by room, and look for stowaways."

"Stowaways? Sir? Do we have stowaways?" the Seaman looked baffled.

"That's what I want you to find out", Zuko repeated himself, "Report to me when your done. Both of you."

Both men bowed before leaving.

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A few hours later

The storm is coming, Iroh thought to himself as he looked at the sky. The sunny morning was a distant memory as the clouds in varying shades of gray moved to cover the horizon. _If we don't fix the engine soon, we'll be caught right in the middle of it._

Something else caught Iroh's attention. The howling wind was getting louder by the minute, but not loud enough to cover the sounds of an argument.

"... why have I not been asked?"

"Lieutenant Jee, watch it! I'm your commanding officer!" Zuko shouted back.

"Only the guilty get questioned like this, and I vouch for every man aboard this ship." The Lieutenant argued.

"Well, then we have nothing to worry about, do we?" Zuko snarled in a very menacing way, causing a few crew members that had stopped to listen to take a few steps back.

"Prince Zuko!" Iroh hurried over to the scene and tried quickly to think of a way to excuse himself and his nephew from this conversation. "I need to have a word with you about our travel plan. Right now."

All eyes turned on him. For a moment Zuko looked like he would protest, but then he just nodded.

Iroh said a few more pleasantries to ease the atmosphere and then lead his nephew down to his room.

"I had the situation under control!" Zuko burst out. "You didn't have to do that."

"What was going on?" Iroh asked.

"I've been asking around the crew, and Lieutenant Jee had a problem with the fact that he hasn't been kept on the know on what's going on", Zuko admitted.

"I see", Iroh replied. There were many questions that raised, the most pressing of them being: "Have you discovered anything?"

Zuko's shoulders slumped: "No, but I'm not just being paranoid. Or vengeful because someone in the crew already betrayed me to Zhao once. Captain Jee thinks no one on the crew would've done it, but something about this, all of this, just doesn't feel right."

Iroh, too, had the feeling more was going on than met the eye, but this still was behavior unbecoming of a Prince. Perhaps it was time he and Zuko had the Talk, even though Iroh would've preferred to wait out the storm first.

Iroh sighed. This wouldn't be easy. On either of them.

Then again what needs to be done is never unnecessary.

"Zuko", Iroh paused to wait until his nephew lifted his gaze from his hands and looked his uncle in the eye, "We need to talk."

"I know", Zuko admitted, resignation in his voice.

"You've changed."

Zuko flinched at the word but he didn't avert Iroh's gaze. Instead he sighed and said: "I know. I know I've been frightening the crew, but I promise I'll try to avoid doing that from now on. I don't want to rule through intimidation. I'm not like Azula. I'm not like my... I'm not like that."

Iroh nodded. He was grateful Zuko was meeting him halfway on this by admitting that he had indeed changed. That wasn't enough, though. Zuko wouldn't be getting off that easy. Not when Iroh suspected he could handle more: "I'm glad to hear you've decided to be more gentle on the crew. That, however, isn't the only thing I was referring to."

Zuko's eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly: "What do you mean?"

Here goes. I do hope I'm right about him being ready to hear this.

"Ever since you came back... and truth be told, even long before that, I've noticed considerable changes in your attitudes and beliefs. Increasingly of late."

"I don't know what you're talking about", Zuko said, but Uncle suspected he did.

"Especially the moment when you told me that you let the Avatar go without there being at least a physical injury to stop you from pursuing him. That confirmed many of my suspicions."

"Are you saying I'm a traitor?" Zuko sounded more upset than angry. Another good sign.

"Oh no. Of course not. I'm just saying that the kind of behaviour you showcased a few days ago sounded like something a rational person with his priorities straight would do. I'm glad you've learned to admit your limitations and save your energy for fights worth fighting for."

Zuko looked very upset now, but he appeared to guess more was coming. The teenager braced himself before asking: "And you think it's because I turned into a dragon?"

A good question. How to best answer it?

"Yes and no. I do suspect that the change was more than just a physical one."

Zuko's face fell. Iroh tried to quickly comfort him: "But change isn't always a bad thing. It's a natural part of life. We all change, and sometimes it can even be... healthy."

"So don't be afraid of changing. It doesn't mean you won't still be you. You're still my strong-willed and quick-tempered nephew. In fact, you have more characteristic that are traditionally considered traits of fire than perhaps anyone else I've known. However, I do believe dragons are also in small part air, traits of which are being liberal and even, well, playful. I have to admit I haven't personally witnessed that side to dragons, but then again all the dragons I've met were very old, where as you are still very, very young..."

"I'm not carefree and irresponsible! I'm nothing like the Avatar!" Zuko's temper was flaring.

Iroh knew his nephew's limits and they hadn't been reached yet, so he went on, his tone very serious: "I don't think it's just turning into a dragon that has changed you, though. More important than that have been all the things you've learned and experienced recently. Some of the things you've discovered have made you question things you previously took for granted, and when you've questioned something once, it's impossible to go back to blind faith."

Zuko fell very quiet. Iroh had been preparing himself for any reaction his nephew might have to such an obvious reference to his father, but he hadn't expected silence. Iroh wasn't sure if it was a good or a bad sign. Either way, he wasn't going to back down yet: "Believe me when I say this. I speak from experience."

After that Iroh remained silent, giving Zuko time to consider his words. When Zuko finally opened his mouth, his voice was barely more than a raspy whisper: "What do you want me to do?"

Iroh shook his head slowly: "I'm not going to tell you what to do. I just want you to stop and really consider the consequences that your future actions might hold on the long run." _He's certainly had enough people telling him what he's allowed to do with his life without adding me to the bunch. _"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"But... The Avatar is dangerous. I've witnessed that personally", Zuko sounded confused.

"And I'm not saying he isn't. Anyone with that much power is indeed very dangerous."

Zuko shook his head: "He isn't just dangerous because he's powerful. He's dangerous because he's a naive fool."

"The Avatar is very young", Iroh allowed, "but I want you to consider this: if the Avatar is really such a danger, why do so many support him? Why is he a beacon of hope rather than something to be feared to so many?"

Zuko's tone was solemn as he answered: "Because they want to destroy the Fire Nation any means necessary and they believe the Avatar to be their best shot at it."

Probably true in at least some cases. Though not really helping me to make my point. Maybe I should try a different angle.

"Do you believe the Avatar would do that? Destroy the Fire Nation?"

Zuko considered that for awhile: "Maybe not on purpose. But it's like I said: half the time the kid himself doesn't know what he's doing, but he does it anyway."

Which doesn't sound at all like someone else I know, Iroh thought to himself. Though to his nephew's credit, perhaps the Avatar was in fact the more reckless of the two.

"Hmm. Sounds to me like the Avatar is in need of help", Iroh said thoughtfully, emphasizing the 'new revelation' factor of the thought by grooming his beard.

"No", Zuko said, "I'm pretty sure he needs to be stopped."

Pretty sure? I can work with that.

BOOM!

The entire ship shook. Zuko got up and run out of the room: "Now what?"

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A/N:

To be continued .

As is apparent from this chapter, I know little about combustion engines. Or military ranks. Good thing it's a made-up universe so I can get away with made-up techy terms and titles.

18. Dangerous Waters

****18. Dangerous Waters****

"Now what?" Prince Zuko asked as he stepped on the deck. Before anyone had time to answer, however, the chaos around him finally registered. Looking around, it wasn't hard to guess what had caused the noise.

Zuko hadn't ordered the catapult to be put on the ready, but it was up on the deck nonetheless. What was left of it, anyway.

"Who did this?" Zuko's brows furrowed.

Most of the crew was there, probably having come to see what had exploded. Now they were busy looking innocent and avoiding his gaze.

That's it.

"Are you telling me that _no one_ saw _anything_? 'Cause this thing did _not_ happen on its own", Zuko was almost shouting. Either his crew was much more incompetent than he had ever realized or they were all in this together.

"Sir", Lieutenant Jee took a few steps towards him, a stern look on his face, "I take full responsibility for this."

That took Zuko by surprise. It took him a moment to process the information.

Before the Prince answered, he made sure his voice sounded calmer. He had promised.

"Okay, but you didn't do this, right?" Zuko wanted to be sure.

"No, sir, but it shouldn't have happened under my watch."

Zuko felt like retorting 'got that right', but he didn't. He was, after all, at least as much to blame as the Lieutenant.

I should be the one apologizing to them. I shouldn't have let this happen. Not on my ship.

Zuko would get to the bottom of this.

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The positive thing was that no one had been seriously injured in the explosion. Also, although the catapult was beyond repair, the explosion hadn't damaged the ship's hull or any other vital elements to their traveling.

In Iroh's opinion this was too fortunate to be a coincidence.

It meant that the saboteur was familiar with explosives. Also, that he had no intention of killing them all. That was positive, too.

The catapult had no significance in getting them to safety. Loosing it was nowhere near as problematic as loosing the engine had been.

The worrying part was that they had no idea who had destroyed the catapult or even how he had managed the deed. There were no explosives aboard the ship, so either someone had smuggled some on board or they had used advanced firebending.

If the answer was the latter, it would certainly narrow down the list of suspects. A bit too much so. Iroh didn't believe anyone other than he himself or his nephew had the raw power and the finesse it took to pull something like this off.

Zuko was even more moody and quiet than he'd been earlier, which by itself was quite an achievement. The boy blamed himself for not having caught the saboteur before he struck again.

The Prince was now going through the wreckage one more time, trying to find anything that might give them a better idea of who was behind these attacks.

The rain was pouring harder by the minute, and Iroh could already hear thunder in the distance. They were running out of time.

Another attack so soon and on such a public place was bound to raise suspicions, which meant that either the saboteur was getting worried he'd be caught soon and had decided to act when he still could, or he

was getting cocky.

Needless to say, everyone aboard was now aware that they had a saboteur among them.

The general mood was only slightly more cheery than his nephew's. No one wanted to believe that one of their own had not only gone against their orders but, in doing so, endangered everyone on the ship.

Iroh did his best to keep up some sort of team spirit. Everyone suspecting everyone wouldn't get them anywhere.

Zuko was walking away from the wreckage. Iroh joined him.

Knowing his nephew was in no mood for small talk, Iroh cut straight to the chase: "Anything new?"

Zuko looked thoughtful and distracted. First Iroh suspected the teenager hadn't heard him.

Finally Zuko sighed and turned to look at Uncle: "Nothing. Nothing on the culprit, anyway. I did discover something new about the method of destruction, though."

Iroh nodded to let Zuko know to go on. On an ordinary day they may have lowered their voices as not to be overheard, but right now the wind and the rain made sure their secrets were safe.

"Whoever did this, I don't think they used explosives. I suspect that someone rigged the catapult, set it on fire using the same tar we use to light the ammo and launched it. While the hatch to the deck was still partially closed. The result being loud, smoky and destructive enough to pass as an explosion."

Damn. So much for my theory about the saboteur being an explosives expert. Or concerned for everyone's well-being.

As Zuko spoke, he waved his arms to demonstrate his words. Something about the way he moved his left arm caught Iroh's attention.

"Prince Zuko, are you hurt?" Iroh asked but didn't wait for an answer. He grabbed his nephew's hand into his, but let go of it almost immediately as Zuko winced at the sudden movement

"I just twisted my shoulder when lifting some torn metal. It's an old injury. No big deal", Zuko tried to shrug him off, but Iroh held his ground.

"You should have Sergeant Cho take a look at it."

Zuko rolled his eyes: "It's fine. Really."

Zuko was about to walk away, but Uncle stopped him.

"No, Zuko. You may be the captain of this ship and the one giving orders around here, but I'm your uncle. Worrying is part of the job description. So, do your old relative a favor and go find Sergeant Cho. Right now."

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Zuko sighed. So typical of Uncle to quibble over unimportant details.

Zuko hadn't mentioned his injury before because it was healing on its own and, all in all, he didn't really feel like telling anyone how he'd gotten his ass kicked by a 12-year-old who wasn't even the Avatar.

Anyway, for the safety of everyone aboard the ship, finding out who was trying to sink them had to be a first priority.

All else came a distant second.

The problem was that Zuko still had no idea who the saboteur was, or even what to do next to find him.

Well, truthfully, one option did come to mind, but using the Power of Dragons had its risks.

So long as he had no clues regarding the saboteur's identity his only option was to go over the whole crew one at a time until he found the culprit, at which point even the slowest of crew members would have figured out his secret.

Not the biggest secret he was keeping right now, but a to-risk-your-life-and-future -big, regardless.

Some other day Zuko may have thought that the risk of trusting his crew to keep the secret was one worth taking, but not today. Today he was in short supply of trust.

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. He felt useless, and uselessness irritated him even more than the fact that his ship had just been robbed of its weapon capabilities.

"It's not a good idea, nephew", Uncle suddenly said, "The risks are too great. We are not yet in immediate danger, and for all we know, catching you using the Power is the saboteur's end game."

And here I'm supposed to be the one who can read minds, Zuko thought wryly to himself.

But Uncle was right, of course. With Zhao on to him, they couldn't be too careful, and the last thing Zuko wanted to do was to play straight into Zhao's hand.

Even going to the medical bay bested sitting around doing nothing. Zuko nodded.

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There was no room for a real medical bay aboard, but they called a small storage room where, among other things, the healing herbs were kept the medical bay. Sergeant Cho wasn't a healer, but he was the one everyone turned to when they were hurt or ill.

Zuko was on his way to the medical bay. He didn't know if Cho would be there, but it was as good a place to look for him as any.

The conversation he and Uncle had had before the latest attack was still playing over in his head.

Air? Me? Surely Uncle is mistaken.

Well, Master Kurita had said that every living thing had each of the four elements in them. Zuko had always presumed that since he was a firebender and fire was obviously his number one element that the other elements had small significance to his life.

If there was more of the other elements inside him than he had ever realized, Zuko would've guessed earth to be his number two element.

He'd fought earthbenders and could respect the way they stood their ground, never giving up without a fight.

Earth was all about patience and waiting for the right time, though, which really wasn't like Zuko. So maybe not earth.

Despite having lived on a ship for three years, Zuko didn't relate to water.

There was something natural and useful about the way it moved, constantly changing position like a skilled swordsman, but water was too cold and lifeless.

On the other hand, maybe he had become more like water of late. It was a strange thought, but he'd heard water was the element of change, and he had changed a great deal.

Then there was air.

The element of detachment, spirituality and, if the Avatar was a good example, gimmick kicks.

Not that Zuko had anything against gimmick kicks. Basic techniques were the most useful one's, but they were a bit boring.

Detachment and letting go had never been easy for Zuko, but they had become easier since he'd turned into a dragon. Before that even, when he'd chosen to give up his hunt to go look for his mother...

Now that he could fly he found himself enjoying that a great deal, though... he'd never been afraid of heights or high falls to begin with. He felt more at home in the sky than under ground. An airy kick was more important to him than a steady stance.

Zuko did move soundlessly like he wasn't even touching the ground. He had practised hard to become as sneaky and fast as he was, but it had never been difficult or felt unnatural. And Kurita had said many of the teachings of the Order were derived from airbending.

The Blue Spirit isn't a bender, but if he was, I don't think he'd be a firebender...

Kurita had also said air was about deception and Zuko believed he was right. The Avatar was good at deceiving people and had little moral scruples over doing so.

Zuko wasn't like that. Ironically, though, Zuko did have many secrets. Maybe deception meant more than just lying effortlessly.

Air was freedom.

Zuko had never been free of his responsibilities as a prince, and he doubted he ever would be. He doubted he even wanted to be. His responsibilities were a part of him and made him the person he was.

So that didn't fit. Not unless freedom meant something other than just lack of responsibilities.

Suddenly one of Uncle's many sayings came to mind.

'Freedom is the freedom to choose the amount of your responsibility.'

That interpretation did make more sense than that all airbenders were irresponsible prats all the time... But what did it mean for Zuko?

'I'm not free to choose my amount of responsibility... Or am I?'

Fire and air had more in common than Zuko had first realized, but in essence they were different.

Air was flowy and free, fire was straightforward and disciplined.

However, Zuko's firebending had always, ever since he was a child, been different from standard firebending.

It was a flaw he'd tried to correct all his life because his father had said it made his bending weak.

In the end, Zuko had never had the patience to completely correct his flawed way of bending because a more flowy version of a kata often came easier to him than the textbook one and had more power behind it.

His father asked for power and perfection in everything, but since Zuko couldn't do both, he had hoped power mattered more than perfection in his father's eyes. That's why he rather created an impressive amount of flame with a flawed kata than a lesser amount with a perfect one.

But what if... his father had been wrong?

What if the fact that Zuko's bending wasn't different didn't mean he was a bad bender?

Kurita had taught that a great bender had to embrace all his sides to achieve his true potential.

'Elements are at their strongest when working together. Alone, no one element is greater than the others.'

Zuko's style wasn't perfect firebending, but maybe that was okay because he himself wasn't _just_ fire. The more Zuko thought about it the more he felt like his style was a mixture of fire _and_ air. And earth and even water.

The Dragon Style.

Of course it was silly to think this way. The Fire Lord was always right.

Except that Zuko didn't really believe in that. Not anymore. Hadn't for years.

The whole point of my quest is to prove he was wrong_ about me._

Zuko had reached the medical bay. He knocked.

"Come in", Sergeant Cho's voice called from behind the metal door.

Zuko opened the door and stepped in. Cho came into view from behind a movable screen and quickly greeted him with a bow: "Prince Zuko. What can I do for you?"

"I hurt my shoulder about five days ago. It had been healing nicely, but now it's hurting again."

"Ah. Normally I'd ask the patient if he has put any strain on his mending limb of late, but knowing you, of course you have. Let me see."

Cho's attitude was bordering on insolence, but somehow Zuko wasn't bothered by that. On the contrary: it was a nice change from everyone else's scared-for-my-life attitude.

Wait a second. Does this mean I've grown a sense of humor?

The Sergeant did a few simple movement tests while Zuko sat on a mattress. Eventually the man concluded what Zuko had already known: the arm would be fine as long as he didn't put more strain on it.

"Is that it?"

"Not quite. I'm still gonna fix up an ointment that alleviates the pain and helps the recovery along."

"I don't mind the pain. There are other places I should..."

"It will only take a second."

Zuko crossed his arms but made no further attempts of fighting back.

Cho turned his back on Zuko and started grinding some herbs. Zuko looked around himself.

Despite the storm raging outside, in the absence of the engine's

roar, the medical bay was much quieter than usually. The silence wasn't a soothing one, though.

The storm is upon us and we still don't have the engine fixed.

Zuko could hear a slow breathing from somewhere near-by.

There is a third person in the room. Behind that screen.

"I didn't realize you already had a patient", Zuko commented, "Who is it? I thought no one was injured in the explosion."

"No one was", the older man said without turning to look at him, "But there's a disease that's been going around in the harbor towns. It's like a severe version of a common cold. The symptoms include a high fever and even hallucinations."

"No need to worry, though. Only one crew member is showing symptoms and I've got the situation contained here. Sergeant Jiri is responding well to the medicine I gave him a few hours ago, so even he should be up and about in a few days."

Something about that statement didn't quite add up in Zuko's mind.

"Wait. I run into Sergeant Jiri not two hours ago and gave him a task to go ask around if anyone had been to the engine room. If he is ill now, anyone on board might have caught it. I wouldn't call that contained."

Sergeant Cho turned to look at the Prince with an astonished expression on his face: "Sir, you must be mistaken. Sergeant Jiri has been ill all day. I wouldn't have allowed a patient to wonder off. Not that he even could've in his current state. It must have been someone else you run into..."

Zuko was up on his feet. He pulled the screen aside just to be sure.

Sergeant Jiri was laying on a mattress. His eyes were closed but his lips were moving inaudibly. The man was only semi-conscious.

"Prince Zuko, be careful. You don't want to catch what he has."

Catching a cold is the least of my worries.

Zuko run out of the room. There was someone, or maybe something, he had to find.

There were two Sergeant Jiri's aboard the ship. Zuko knew it to be impossible, but it was the only explanation he could think of nonetheless. Perhaps it was due time for him to trust believing in what he knew and start looking at all the possibilities.

Zuko arrived at the deck of the ship. Hard rain beat down on his face and high waves clashed against the ship from both sides.

Zuko was relatively sure Sergeant Jiri had been among the crowd of

crew members who had gathered to examine the remains of the catapult. Now, however, there was only a handful of people on deck. The rest must have sought shelter down below.

Zuko looked frantically around. No Sergeant Jiri.

Zuko walked up to a group of three men: "Where did Sergeant Jiri go?"

Seaman Oki looked thoughtful: "I don't know, sir. I'm not sure if I've seen Jiri all day..."

Lieutenant Jee put in: "Sergeant Jiri is ill, sir. I'm sorry that you weren't informed of this sooner but there has been so much going on..."

"Not that Sergeant Jiri", Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to reign in his irritation.

It wasn't their fault that they weren't following his line of thought. Heck, Zuko was still having a hard time following his own line of thought.

"Nephew, what are you doing?" " Iroh's voice asked from behind Zuko.

And of course Uncle had to show up right now and presume the worst.

Zuko had been behaving himself, he really had, but this was an emergency. There was no time to be polite.

The Prince took a deep breath to calm himself before turning to face his uncle.

ooo

Prince Zuko was angry. More angry than usually, but Lieutenant Jee wasn't exactly sure what had brought the mood on this time.

One way or another, Jee was glad Iroh was now here. The Lieutenant was used to dealing with the Prince, but lately the boy had been... different. Although Jee would've never admitted it, he was even a bit intimidated by the teenager.

It was weird.

The boy hadn't picked a fight with anyone or yelled more than usually. On the contrary: where the old Zuko would've yelled or firebent or both, this new Zuko just cocked his head and looked at you like you were something edible.

While Zuko was taking deep breaths Iroh walked up to them. The crew members each gave a nod in turn to acknowledge the old general.

Zuko sprang into motion. Before Jee had time to know what had happened, the young prince had turned around, grabbed Iroh's hand, pulled the man forward and locked his hand behind his back.

Jee didn't have time to protest before Iroh made his own move. The

General showed at the boy with his free hand, managed to twist free of Zuko's grip and took a few steps away from the boy.

"Prince Zuko, what the hell do you think you're doing?" the Lieutenant shouted, "How dare you attack your honored uncle? What's gone into you?"

The Prince looked unapologetic and was obviously ignoring Jee's words. Normally this kind of behavior would've made Jee's blood boil, but the look on Prince Zuko's face now was enough to silence him. Instead of anger he felt fear.

What's going on?

"Who are you?" Prince Zuko asked from Iroh. His question sounded more like a command, his tone leaving no room for debate.

"You know who I am", Iroh's tone was very reasonable considering the circumstances.

Zuko snarled. He shouted: "Stop playing games! I _know_ you're not Iroh."

"I don't know what you're..."

"Stop _lying_. You may look and sound like my uncle but you don't _walk_ like him. Did you really think I wouldn't recognize my own uncle by his _footsteps_?"

The boy has finally lost it, Jee thought to himself.

To his surprise, Iroh didn't try reason with the crazy teenager any further. He simply stood there looking thoughtful.

What is he going to do? I mean, the Prince is acting like a mad man but he is still Iroh's nephew...

"Show yourself" Zuko's voice was a quite growl.

Iroh smiled at the boy, but the look was completely out of place on the old man's face. There was something playful and almost vicious about that smile.

"Very well."

When Lieutenant Jee had thought the day couldn't get any weirder, it did exactly that.

ooo

Before Zuko's eyes, the thing that had only moments ago been the spitting image of his uncle, started to change. It grew taller and leaner in a matter of seconds.

Everyone watched in shocked silence as the creature changed its form. Iroh's gray hair grew longer and changed color into pitch black.

The creature was only half way through its change but Zuko could already tell what it looked like. It was taller than a human, but otherwise more or less humanoid.

Without a warning, the shapeshifter lunged forward. Zuko ducked the attack by diving left, and threw a small firebolt at the being. From this distance the fire should have hit the creature spot on, but it didn't.

Missed? Whatever it is, it's fast.

The crew members present tried to help the Prince and stop the shapeshifter, but the creature tackled them to the ground.

Zuko got back on his feet and threw two more fire bolts and did a few rotation kicks right after that.

Fast or not, no one can dodge everything.

The creature whirled around and was somehow able to dance past every attack the young firebender sent his way. Each time Zuko got closer the shapeshifter simply took a few graceful leaps and was again out of Zuko's range.

What is it?

Zuko decided to try something else. He took one of his hidden knives from his boot and threw it at the thing.

For a moment he thought the knife would hit home, but at the last moment the creature grabbed the knife from mid-air, turned 180 degrees and hurled the knife back at Zuko.

Zuko rolled out of the way, got up on his hands and kicked with both his feet. The bolt was so big the creature wasn't able to completely get out of the way.

The fire singed the shapeshifter's right arm. It hissed in irritation.

Zuko needed a plan, but more importantly, he needed to know what he was up against.

What all do I know of my adversary? Zuko wondered while keeping up his pursuit of the creature across the deck.

He's fast. He's a shapeshifter. He wants to hurt me.

What else?

_He's a spirit. He moves like he's dancing, but not the way the Avatar does. He runs and twist and turns but he doesn't
jump.

That's it. The element of change.

Zuko had never fought a spirit before, but he had fought
waterbenders.

_Let's hope the same rules apply when fighting a water
spirit._

Basic techniques were too simple. The spirit saw them coming.

Zuko decided to try something unconventional instead.

You think that because I'm a firebender my attacks will be straightforward. Well, let's see what you think about this one.

Zuko threw a long, thin stream of fire at the creature. The spirit flowed out of the way as usual.

Zuko wasn't done yet, though. He had invented this move himself a few weeks back, but hadn't had time to use it in a fight before.

He had gotten the inspiration for the attack from the way Katara used the same water in more than one attack.

If it works with water then why not with fire?

Instead of letting his fire dissipate as it passed its target, Zuko held on to it. It took a great deal of strength to keep the fire alive while changing its direction, but he was determined to make this work.

Zuko whirled his hands in front of him like he'd seen Katara do when calling back her water. The fire obeyed his will. It swirled around and headed back towards him.

The spirit noticed something was going on, but a moment too late.

Zuko ended his kata by thrusting his right palm in front of his body. The fire changed direction once again.

Now that Zuko's will was no longer holding the fire steady, it sped up to the direction Zuko's hand had showed it. Straight towards the spirit.

The hit threw the creature off its feet. Zuko didn't waste any time. He ran for the thing.

The spirit got up, but instead of running away it charged at Zuko. Soon the Prince found himself in hand-to-hand combat with the thing.

Only now he fully realized just how tall the spirit was. Its long limbs appeared to be able to reach for him even from the unlikeliest angles.

Zuko had had enough. He was determined to end this.

The Prince jumped high into the air and whirled a wide kick, forcing the spirit down. As Zuko prepared his finishing blow, the spirit grabbed the boy's fist into its bony hand.

When the hit Zuko had been charging in his fist met with the spirit's icy cold hand the result was a small explosion.

The force of the blast threw Zuko across the deck but he managed to orient himself while still in air and land on his feet. Even after landing he still glided a few meters on the wet deck. Zuko crouched

down, ready for whatever the spirit would throw at him next.

The spirit had been thrown over to the other side of the ship. It, too, had landed in a crouch.

For a moment the two stared at one another. Suddenly, the spirit began to laugh. It lifted its face up and spoke: "Looks like water and fire don't mix well. Who knew?"

For the first time Zuko got a good look at the spirit.

The creature was so human-like that on a quick glance you could've mistaken it for one. A closer look, however, revealed a myriad of inhuman qualities.

The spirit was wearing black battle trousers, but no shoes or shirt. Apparently it could change outfits as easy as it could change appearances.

Its skin was extremely pale and so translucent you could clearly see blue veins underneath it. It looked like it had never seen sunlight.

In stark contrast to its white skin, the spirit's hair was pitch black and so wavy it was tangled in dreadlocks. The endless locks of hair flowed freely down its back, looking more like a thick bush of seaweed than hair.

The spirit's eyes were an unnaturally piercing shade of blue.

"You. You did this! You sabotaged my ship!" Zuko shouted over the howling wind, "Why? Why are you trying to hurt us?"

The water spirit rolled his eyes: "You humans take everything so personally. I'm here because I was curious to see what was so special about one small human being that it caught the attention of the Spirit Realm."

The spirit's nonchalant attitude took Zuko by surprise. He composed himself and took a few steps towards it, all the while keeping his guard up, ready to create fire.

Instead of matching Zuko's battle stance, the spirit got up from its crouch, rising to its full height of about two meters.

Its body was nothing but skin, bone and muscle. The creature's fingernails were tall and shiny, like talons, and Zuko made a mental note to keep clear of them. Between its fingers and toes the spirit had fins, and on its neck it had quills.

A creature designed for water, Zuko realized.

All in all, as disturbing as the spirit's appearance was, it was almost handsome in its creepy inhuman way.

"And now that we are doing the 'explain-my-evil-plan' thing, I should probably tell you that I originally came to look for the Avatar, not you. However, this latest Spirit of the World turned out to be quite a bore. He's so young and so... Air Nomad. Take my word for it: when you've met one of them, you've met them all. You are much more

interesting."

The spirit looked around itself.

Lieutenant Jee and the rest of the crew present had gotten their act together and were now circling around the spirit. Zuko signaled them to keep their distance from the thing. They appeared eager to obey that command.

More crew members entered the deck, alarmed by the sounds of fighting. From the corner of his eye Zuko saw his uncle among them. He wanted badly to have a word with him, but now was not the time.

Uncle took a step towards the spirit. He wasn't in a fighting stance. Instead he had his arms in his sleeves.

"Respected Water Spirit", Uncle addressed the creature. His words were polite but his tone was hard: "Have we done something to offend you?"

The spirit looked bemused: "Hardly."

"Are you attacking us because you're a being of water and we're Fire Nation?" Zuko speculated.

"Why would you say such a thing?" the spirit wondered, feign innocence, "You think me a racist? Because I'm not. I care equally little for people of Water and Fire alike. All people, really."

"Then what do you want with us?" Zuko was starting to loose his patience.

"You did hear me say '_people_', right?" a vicious, knowing smile crossed the spirit's face, "That word doesn't really apply to _you_ anymore, does it?"

It knows?

The spirit laughed: "Please don't tell me you actually thought you could just casually turn into a dragon and still fly under everyone's radar? You know what they say: with great power comes great enemies."

"So it's _me_ you're trying to kill", Zuko bit his lip, his voice a snarl.

"Still taking it personally, are we?" the spirit waved its hands and rolled his eyes, "Of course I'm not. Killing is intimate and we barely know each other. Our relationship isn't quite there yet. We are at the courtship period, at best."

"If you're _not_ trying to kill us" why did you trap us in this storm?"

As if to emphasize Zuko's words, a lightning flashed across the sky.

The spirit cocked its head, finally looking serious: "Because I can.

Where would be the fun in playing it safe, anyway?"

"This isn't a game."

"Yes, it is", the spirit said, "But I wouldn't except a pawn like you to see your part in it."

A massive wave crashed against the side of the ship. Zuko had to grab hold of a railing to stay on his feet.

Zuko turned to look at the spirit. The storm drowned out its next words but the Prince could read them from its lips.

"Until we meet again."

In one easy motion, the spirit climbed over the railing and jumped.

Zuko run to the railing, but he couldn't see anything moving in the stormy water.

Gone. Good riddance.

Zuko had more pressing matters to take care off.

The Prince turned to address his crew: "We can get through this. After all we've been through, this little storm has _nothing_ on us. We're going to be fine."

After that Zuko started handing out orders. Even with the engine out they still had some steering capabilities.

Uncle suggested they would make the most of them and head for the eye of the storm. Zuko trusted his judgment on the matter.

After a while, the sun began to shine and the wind calmed down.

The eye, Zuko realized. _Uncle, you're a genius._

Suddenly something big burst out of the water not too far from the ship.

He's back, Zuko thought and took a firebending stance, but it wasn't the spirit. It was... the Avatar.

Zuko looked at the bison as it rose to the sky and flew further and further away. He felt oddly disconcerned about the fact that the Avatar was once again getting away.

Uncle was next to Zuko. He placed his hand on Zuko's shoulder.

"The engine?" Zuko asked without turning to look at the older man.

"Should be operational very soon."

Zuko nodded: "We will head for the shore as soon as we can."

"You did well, nephew", Iroh said.

"I should've seen it sooner..." Zuko began, but before he had time to say more, Iroh cut in: "No, Prince Zuko. It is I who should've seen a spirit's handywork in this. It is you who we have to thank for exposing and fighting off our saboteur."

Zuko gulped: "It could come back..."

"I'll be sure to prepare a ritual or two that ought to keep uninvited spiritual guests away from this ship, although I doubt the Nakki is coming back."

So the creature has a name.

"Why wouldn't it?"

"We've been traveling the seas a long time and never before has a spirit, mighty or small, attacked us this openly. Nakkis live in dangerous waters, usually rapids or waterfalls, and I suspect that the faster the water from which they draw their strength moves the stronger they are. Still, if not even the full strength of the storm was enough to help it best you, nothing will, and the spirit knows this."

"This was... a scouting trip", Zuko realized, "But the real question is why? What does the spirit want from me?"

Iroh looked thoughtful and serious.

"I'm not sure. The motives of a spirit aren't always easy to guess and when dealing with a spirit specialized in deception, I don't think we can put much weight on the vague excuses the Nakki itself gave us."

"Spirits aren't of our world. They do not think the way humans do. However, I fear this spirit may not have been working alone. We must keep our eyes and other senses open for more signs of spiritual activities from now on."

Uncle's idea sounded simple enough. Except...

"I know next to nothing about spirits. I mean, as a kid I heard all sorts of interesting tales, but when it comes to dealing with real, living spirits, I've so far been acting on a hunch."

"A condition we are sure to remedy as soon as possible", Iroh reassured his nephew.

Zuko nodded. There was one more thing he needed to say: "The spirit knew what I am. It said as much in front of the whole crew. What should I do now?"

"I'm sure everything will work out", Uncle told him, "All will look better tomorrow. You'll see."

ooo

In the next morning there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The storm was a distant memory.

They had anchored as soon as the engine had been fully operational

again. Still, Zuko didn't want to put any extra stress on it just yet. They would continue their journey once it was safe.

I think we've had enough lifethreatening situations for a day.

"Sir", Lieutenant Jee bowed deeply at the young man, "We are done going over the ship, sir. No hidden damages or booby traps that we could find."

Zuko nodded. He trusted Jee's judgement on the matter.

"Sir", the Lieutenant continued, "I apologize for my behaviour yesterday. I shouldn't have questioned your methods of looking for the saboteur. You were right to be suspicious of everyone."

"No", Zuko said and turned to face the Lieutenant, "If I had co-ordinated my search with you, we might have caught the spirit earlier."

Jee looked surprised, but bowed again before leaving.

Yep, should definitely give positive feedback more often.

Jee had already turned to leave when he stopped: "One more thing, sir."

Zuko had expected this. There was, after all, only so long a dragon could fly under radar: "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"We're glad to have you back. No matter what anyone says, it's a privilege to serve under you, sir."

Now it was Zuko's turn to look surprised. He didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything.

Jee bowed again and Zuko bowed back at him.

ooo

The part that had bothered Jee about Zuko's investigation hadn't been so much that he hadn't been kept in the know. More worrisome was that the Lieutenant Jee hadn't believed the Prince was committed to keeping his crew safe but that he was after petty vengeance.

The only thing worse than an incompetent leader is a callous one, Jee thought to himself.

Zuko had proven Jee's doubts wrong, and the Lieutenant had had to let the young man know that the crew appreciated the lengths he'd gone to to keep them safe.

The Prince was often difficult, quick-tempered and even a bit scary, but when it really mattered, the young man had never let his crew down. Jee intended to make sure that trust could be mutual.

Your secrets are safe with us should you ever choose to reveal them.

(())(())

****A/N****

In the episode _Firebending Masters_ it is said that the style of firebending dragons use is different from other firebending styles, and that it is the best style for Zuko. In my opinion, one of the main differencies between the Dragon Style and other firebending styles is that the Dragon Style appears to be a mixture of fire and airbending.

This chapter features a spirit who is rather unlike the (few) other spirits featured in the series.

This is because, although the character is partially based on how spirits are described to be like in ATLA world, he's more closely related to a water spirit featured in Finnish mythology called NÄŕkki (similar to NÄŕcken in Scandinavian folklore or Neck in Germanic folklore).

NÄŕkki is a shapeshifting water spirit who usually appears in a human form and lives in dangerous watery places such as rapids, streams or waterfalls.

In mythology, he is principally known for pulling young children into the depths (story parents tell to guide children away from unsafe practices) or for playing enchanted songs on a violin, luring people to drown.

However, not all of these spirits were described malevolent. Many stories exist that indicate they were entirely harmless to their audience. If properly approached, NÄŕkki would teach a musician to play extremely adeptly.

Stories also exist wherein the spirit agrees to live with a human who has fallen in love with him, although many of them end with the spirit returning to his home. They are said to grow despondent if they do not have free, regular contact with a water source.

Nakki in my story is an ATLA _version_ of this water spirit, so the stuff that I just described doesn't all apply.

I can barely wait until we get to the next chapter. We're really gonna get to shuffle the deck, the plot thickens and, of course, there will be plenty of action.

In the mean time, don't forget to review :)

19. Shameless Competition

****A/N****

Sorry it took me this long to update. I was abroad for a while, which is also the reason why I haven't replied to anyone's reviews or PMs, but I have read them and appreciate the feedback.

I had to update this twice because there was something wrong with the first update (I couldn't see it).

((()))

****19. Shameless Competition****

"And?" Uncle hurried Zuko to go on. This type of behavior was very unlike of the old man.

"And nothing. That's the end of the story", Zuko shrugged his shoulders to emphasize how there really was nothing to it. His nonchalant attitude would have been passable if it weren't for the obvious irritation in his voice.

_So maybe I'm not exactly _impartial_ to what's going on. There's still nothing I can _do_ about it. Nothing short of treason, anyway._

Zuko wanted badly to go out there and do something about the whole thing, and he had to keep reminding himself that if capturing the Avatar was more important than going home, he shouldn't do anything. His mind told him to stay, while his heart told him to go.

Uncle looked astonished. After a moment the old man managed to gather his posture. He pinched the bridge of his nose, which was again a very unusual gesture for his usually patient uncle.

"Let's see if I got this right", Iroh finally spoke, "When you told me earlier tonight that you were going on a scouting trip to find leads on the Avatar, you _actually meant_ you were planning to break into one of the Fire Nation's best secured strongholds in Earth Kingdom to spy on Zhao."

Uncle lifted his eyes to meet Zuko's. The teenager nodded.

A ship under Zhao's command had forced them off their course, and Zuko had felt like returning the favor, so to speak, by eavesdropping on Zhao's private conversations.

"And while there", Uncle went on, "You learned that not only has Commander Zhao been promoted to the rank of an Admiral but that he intends to use the Yu Yan archers to capture the Avatar."

Zuko rolled his eyes. Was Uncle going to go through every word he'd just told him? Zuko was already starting to regret his promise to let Iroh know when he was going somewhere even if he'd only be gone a few hours.

Zuko sighed. He tried to be patient. Uncle just worried and didn't want Zuko to disappear on him. Again. Zuko could hardly blame him for that.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Okay", Uncle sighed, "I have to admit the story so far doesn't surprise me at all. It sounds exactly like something my foolhardy nephew might do. But here's the part that I don't understand: after learning all this you intend to do _nothing_ about it?"

Zuko closed his eyes and grimaced before answering: "...Yes."

"Zuko, if you for one moment think that the Admiral wants to capture the Avatar for any other reason than self gain then I have to inform you that you're wrong. That man cares nothing for what's in the best interest of the Fire Nation."

"Yeah, I know", Zuko had been sitting on his mattress, leaning against the far wall of his room, but now he leaned forward, "Even if Zhao's motives are less than noble doesn't mean his deed wouldn't be necessary. The Avatar is dangerous and for the safety of everyone in our nation he needs to be stopped. If Zhao finally stands a change of pulling it off, who am I to stand in his way?"

Zuko looked away and tried to calm himself. He didn't want to take his anger and frustrations out on Iroh. It wasn't Uncle's fault the situation sucked.

The Prince had never respected the Admiral and after learning how Zhao had taken advantage of Ursa's banishment to move ahead on his career, Zuko had outright despised the man.

However, when he'd weighed in his head which was more important, getting even with Zhao or that the Avatar would be captured, it wasn't even a contest. Zuko would and could not risk the safety of his nation for a petty grudge. He had to be better than that.

Zuko stole a glance Iroh's way to see if his uncle looked angry. He didn't. He looked unreadable and serious.

This conversation is far from over, Zuko realized.

"Remember when I told you Zhao came looking for you when you were away?" Iroh asked.

Zuko nodded. He remembered.

"While he was here the Admiral and I had an... interesting conversation...", Uncle went on.

ooo

Four days earlier

"More tea?"

The Commander declined for the third time.

Iroh made a mental note to wait at least a half an hour before offering tea again. He wanted to annoy the man but not to the point where he'd get up and walk away.

The conversation so far had been less informative than Iroh would've hoped, but the evening was still young.

Also, while the Commander was talking to Iroh he wasn't somewhere plotting Zuko's demise. That alone made the trouble worth his while.

"It's been a while since you and I had a chance to catch up. The last time we met you informed us on how splendidly the Fire Nation's glorious world conquest was going along. Anything new on that topic?"

Uncle steered the conversation not-so-casually to a more useful topic.

If the Commander wasn't a complete idiot he would see right through Iroh's attempt. However, Iroh was counting on Zhao being unable to resist a chance to gloat.

"Well", the Commander took his sweet time answering, "I do have several important operations going on even as we speak. No doubt you've already heard of some of them, and then there are others that I'm not in liberty to discuss with anyone, not even a respected old general. I'm sure you understand."

Iroh nodded and sipped his tea. He hadn't expected it to be that easy to get Zhao to slip something about his next move.

The Commander went on: "In fact things have been going very well for me of late. Many in the court have praised my recent accomplishments, and I wouldn't be surprised if the Fire Lord himself would soon acknowledge me with a promotion."

Although Iroh had an excellent poker face, now it completely failed him as he nearly choked on his tea. Uncle had to cough for several moments before he was able to give any reply, and he could see Zhao's irritation grow as the man watched the surprised and disbelieving expressions on his face.

Iroh was surprised. And doubtful.

Granted, his brother had shown considerable favors to the Commander in the past, but Uncle still had a hard time picturing Ozai giving such a significant notice to anyone for doing... what exactly? Trying to capture the Avatar but failing at it?

That hasn't been enough for gaining Ozai's appreciation for others.

No. Iroh's brother was many things but merciful wasn't one of them.

And surely even Ozai saw that under all the arrogance and ambition, Zhao was nowhere near as reasonable and competent as an Admiral had to be.

Iroh knew more on the subject than most. It had, after all, been his own ambition and arrogance that had gotten many men killed by the walls of Ba Sing Se. Since then he had started to seriously question the qualifications by which the Fire Nation Army and Navy chose their leaders.

Surely Zhao was presuming too much.

Or perhaps it was exactly the Commander's ruthless ambition that had gotten him on the Fire Lord's good side. Either way, Iroh seriously hoped the Commander was mistaken.

Iroh had to say something but he couldn't exactly go with a traditional 'that's good news' or 'I'm happy to hear it' because it was awful news and Iroh was disturbed to hear it. Instead he decided to go with something truthful.

"Excuse me", Iroh finally apologized for the coughing, wiped his mouth with a cloth and continued, "I'm interested to hear of your popularity in the Fire Nation. This actually reminds me of an old saying: 'Praise makes good men better and bad men worse'."

It wasn't one of the more subtle sayings Iroh could have used, but it did leave just enough room for interpretation that, although Zhao probably guessed which Iroh thought he was, the man didn't take the matter further.

There was some good in the fact that most people thought Uncle's sayings were little more than old man's ramblings. On the long run it was wiser to keep your enemies close, no matter how unwanted their company often was.

The Commander didn't appear bemused. He looked around himself as if trying to come up with an excuse to leave.

The game wasn't over yet, though. On the contrary.

Sometimes angering your opponent was a good way to create a need for them to explain what they had accomplished. Or were about to.

"Oh, but do forgive me if I'm boring you with old nonsense. My nephew can't stand it either. Probably one of the reasons he didn't take me along", Iroh 'slipped'.

Having a conversation was a lot like fishing, Iroh imagined, although he had little experience of the latter. If you didn't want the fish to leave, you had to give it an impression that it still stood a change of winning. Once the bait was laid, all you had to do was reel in nice and slow.

The Commander's eyes focused. There was a sharp edge to his tone: "Perhaps. Say, where did you say Prince Zuko had gone again?"

"Well", Iroh looked thoughtful, "my nephew did not exact where he was heading, but keeping in mind his character and goals, I dare wager he is very busy searching for a way to regain his honor."

Once again, Iroh's statement was true to the word. Truth was what best lies and distractions were made of.

The gist was that Zhao thought he knew Zuko's character and goals very well and would thus jump to his own conclusions. But Zhao did not know Zuko. There was more to the boy than most people could see.

Iroh usually counted himself as one of the few who understood the Prince, but right now he wasn't so certain.

If I truly know my nephew as well as I think I do, why don't I have any idea where he is right now?

Iroh quickly brushed the thought aside. Now was no time to dwell on the matter.

Zhao had lifted an inquiring brow, signaling with his face the

question '_Are you really going to keep wasting my time, telling me things I already knew?_'. .

"Not that I can blame him for insisting to walk his path alone", Iroh sighed over his cup of tea, forming a glassy eyed 'lost-in-my-memory-and-not-on-the-top-of-my-game' look on his face.

"The thing you need to know about honor is that it's not as easy to evaluate as many think. Every man makes his own honor, and thus every man must decide for himself how to best bring glory to his nation, ancestry and the spirits. Wouldn't you agree?"

Iroh saw, just for a split second, Zhao's confident smile falter.

The shift in the Commander's mood told Uncle he was pulling the right strings. Iroh felt a bit uncomfortable poking at any man, even Zhao, where he knew it would hurt the most, but in war and love...

It was no secret that Zhao came from a family that had once been one of the most influential families in all of Fire Nation but that had little economical or political influence anymore.

What was not as widely known was that, to Zhao, his family's imaginary power derived from the supposedly glories ancestry was a sore spot.

Iroh didn't know the details of the Commander's personal past, but he presumed that the man was tired of hearing unambitious men talk about mighty past when the grand stories held no real significance today.

Indeed, Zhao was definitely different from his father and grandfather. Commander Zhao was a man who aimed to create his own glory, earn his own power and forge his own destiny. He craved to be remembered by future generations more than he cared about the well-being of those around him in the here and now.

Iroh could appreciate Zhao for wanting to earn his dues, but not for much else. Zhao was so blinded by his bitterness, so tired of being looked down upon, that ever since assuming the position of a Commander, he had proven himself willing to make great sacrifices to ensure victory.

Oddly, the Commander and his nephew had much in common and were still nothing alike.

Zhao quickly gathered his composure and smiled at Iroh.

"Well, at least _I _know I'm bringing glory to my nation. On the other hand, I know little of and care even less for the opinions of long dead relatives. When it comes to spirits..." Zhao stopped to consider his next words.

"Spirits aren't as useless as ancestors for they do have some effect on the world. However, the mere fact that they exist does not make them all mighty beings to be feared and worshiped that so many in their uneducated awe superstitiously presume they are. _Man_ is the ultimate player in the shaping of this world, and if the spirits

disagree, they should be reminded that they are not as invincible as they'd like to be."

Iroh knew he must've looked ridiculous, sitting there gaping at the Commander, at a loss of what to say, but he barely cared.

If Zhao had intended to shock Iroh with his last statement (he probably counted Uncle into the uneducated horde blind in their customs and old ways), he had succeeded.

After that the Commander, apparently pleased with how the conversation had turned out, said nothing more regarding his plans or opinions, so Uncle could only begin to guess what he had exactly implied to.

The little he had, very much intentionally, revealed, had been alarming enough to give Iroh the chills. He wanted to know more, but knew it would be futile to try to make Zhao tell anything else.

Iroh realized he had underestimated Zhao.

He had thought the man was incapable of making long term plans or keeping important discoveries to himself to be revealed at the most inopportune moment.

Turned out Zhao not only had had the patience and insight to plan something big, but he'd also been smart enough to keep all the key facts to himself until the last possible moment.

Iroh had to admit defeat for now, but he hadn't been left entirely empty handed. Zhao hadn't revealed his plan, but he had confirmed that he had a plan and implied at what it might be.

Iroh feared there was almost no limit to what the Commander was capable of. He had a bad feeling that whatever Zhao's end game was, it revolved around the young Avatar.

ooo

The present

"Okay. That does sound worrisome, but what do you want me to do about it?" Zuko asked.

Normally the Prince hated it when people tried to talk him into or out of doing something, but this time he didn't mind. If this conversation was headed in the direction Zuko thought it was headed, he actually wanted to be talked into whatever it was that Uncle had in mind.

"The Avatar is dangerous, but the Admiral is dangerous and ruthless. If there is something that worries me more than the thought of the Air Nomad running free, it is what Zhao might do if he got his hands on the boy."

Zuko thought that over in his head.

Uncle is right to presume Zhao wouldn't hesitate to do anything to get more power. The man wouldn't have any problem putting everyone under him at risk for a shot at glory.

Also, Zhao obviously has no understanding or respect towards spirits. The thought of putting the Spirit of the World, one of the most powerful beings that have ever walked this earth, into his greedy hands does sound... terrifying.

After a long while, Zuko nodded.

"You're right. We can't be sure Zhao will be able to capture the Avatar even with the help of the Yu Yan, let alone that he would do something incredibly stupid once he has the boy, but the risk of him doing exactly that is too high to be ignored."

It was easy for Zuko to say these words. Much easier than he would've expected it to be.

_I've kept telling myself that the Avatar's power and irresponsible nature make him my number one enemy, but I don't really believe in that. _

_I don't see Aang as my nemesis. He might be irritating and elusive but, to me, he's always been more of an objective than a person.

_

_I don't _hate_ him. I don't see him that way._

He isn't even my biggest concern; not when people as callous as Zhao have almost as much, or maybe even more power than the Avatar.

Whatever. My relation to him is what it is and won't change and can't be changed as long as he's the Avatar and I'm the Prince of Fire Nation.

The world isn't black and white. Zhao is on the Fire Nation side and the Avatar isn't, but they are perhaps equally dangerous in their ignorance and pride.

If anyone ever found out that Zuko had helped the Avatar in any way for any reason, he could kiss goodbye to any chance he ever had of going home. The stakes were high.

The Prince wasn't sure if the old Zuko would've decided to do what he now did. The new Zuko could and would live with it, though.

Zuko got up to his feet.

"Where do you think you're going?" Uncle asked.

"I'm going to find the Avatar before Zhao does and do whatever it takes to make sure the Admiral doesn't get his hands on the boy."

"At this hour?" Uncle looked exaggeratedly surprised, "Finding the Avatar won't be easy when he's somewhere sleeping. I seriously doubt even Zhao plans to send the archers to look for him in the dead of night."

"You've already been up half the night sneaking around. You should wait for morning and get some rest before setting off on your next

journey."

Aka 'A man needs his rest.'

"Fine", Zuko sighed, "But we'll go look for the airbender first thing in the morning."

"We?" Uncle sounded a bit taken aback.

Zuko realized he may have presumed more than they had actually agreed on: "You don't have to come if you don't want to. I just thought..."

"I would love to come with you", Uncle put in quickly yet politely, "Say, were you thinking of bringing some of the crew along as well? The looking might go faster that way."

Now it was Zuko's turn to look surprised.

Take my crew along? On a mission that might require me to aid the Avatar to escape from Zhao?

"Why not", Zuko shrugged.

I trust them.

Zuko, Iroh and three crew members were packed and ready to go before dawn.

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"I'm sorry", Katara was close to tears.

"What for?" Aang hurried to console her. He didn't want Katara to be sad under any circumstances, but especially not when she really wasn't to blame.

"So what if Sokka and you are feeling a bit under the weather. That's not anyone's fault", Aang continued as sincerely as he could.

Katara shook her head: "But I'm a waterbender and waterbenders are supposed to be able to heal. That's what Shuy said. I'm supposed to be able to make everyone feel better, but I just don't know how. I've tried a hundred times but still nothing."

"This isn't like the time when I healed the bruise on Sokka's forehead when we were at Jet's... Earlier. This time I can't _see_ what's wrong! I don't even know where to place my hand or how to move my wrist..."

"Its okay" Aang said, "Who knows, maybe waterbending healing doesn't even _work_ on diseases."

"Or maybe I'm just the worst waterbender ever", Katara said bitterly and looked away.

"No you're not! You can heal and bend although you've never been taught! Besides, you don't see _me_ doing any better and I'm _the_ Avatar_."

Katara turned to look at Aang. She smiled at him: "Maybe you're right. But what do we do then? Sokka needs help. He needs medicine..."

Katara tried to get up but couldn't finish her sentence or movement as she started coughing. Aang pushed her back down.

"You're not feeling too well yourself", the airbender pointed out, "Let me worry about getting medicine. According to my map, there's a healing facility not far from here. I'll be there and back in no time. In the meanwhile, Appa will look after you. Won't you buddy?"

The bison lifted its head and made a sound that Aang decided meant he agreed.

"Okay, then off I go", the monk smiled at Katara for one final time before he turned around and raced for the healing facility on top of a near-by mountain.

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Zuko cursed silently.

Seaman Oki had just informed him that the Avatar had been sighted not far from their current location. This would have been good news, if it weren't for the fact that he hadn't been sighted by any of Zuko's companions.

A local guard post had seen the Avatar running towards a mountain, on top of which there was an abandoned healing facility. That must be where he was headed.

The post had given a general alarm to all near-by troops. Which meant the Yu Yan were surely already on their way and would probably get there before Zuko did.

The Prince took a deep breath and made sure to calm himself before giving any orders.

It wasn't his men's fault they hadn't found the Avatar first. On the contrary. The news might have taken even longer to get to him if it weren't for the extra help.

There was still hope.

Zuko opened his eyes. Iroh looked calm. The rest looked a bit worried at how he was going to react.

Zuko had told them that Zhao was here as well, but he hadn't mentioned the Yu Yan were involved as not to discourage anyone. They were a bit... legendary.

"This is what we do: I run ahead and try to get to the healing facility as fast as I can while you follow close behind, carrying our things and keeping up a grid. I need you to make sure that if the Avatar turns around and runs back the way he came from, he will encounter resistance. I have a strong feeling that since he's chosen to go on foot, he's probably making a round trip and planning to return the way he came. Understood?"

While Zuko spoke, he removed the few armors that he had put on that morning. He was immensely grateful for having had the insight to not wear his full armor, since it looked like it was going to be a literal race for the Avatar.

In all honesty, even if the Avatar was planning to return the same way he had come from, he was unlikely to be able to do that with the Yu Yan after him. Since Zuko was the only one with the speed and endurance to get there in time, his men wouldn't probably be of any use in capturing the Avatar.

However, Zuko didn't want to say that and he wasn't going to run off without leaving any standing orders. Also, they had proven useful already.

Not telling them to follow would be a waste of resources, and I have those scarcely as it is.

The men nodded, not questioning his orders. Other men may have been surprised, but his crew was used to the Prince running off alone, doing all the work himself.

Uncle came to say a quick farewell. He whispered: "And if the Yu Yan are already there when you get there? Will you fight the Avatar?"

Zuko weighed his options briefly. Some time ago he would've considered stopping to plan his move a waste of time, but he had grown since. Uncle had a point.

"No. I'll try to get in the Yu Yan's way. Literally, if I have to."

Maybe it was because Iroh looked so distressed at the thought of Zuko jumping in front of arrows, but suddenly Zuko had a great urge to comfort the old man somehow.

Before the Prince knew what he was doing, he had quickly but firmly wrapped his arms around Uncle. Iroh's body was stiff out of surprise but he managed to hug back anyway.

Zuko whispered: "I'll be fine. Nothing crazy, I promise."

Then he took a step back and the moment was over as suddenly as it had begun.

The Prince felt his cheeks blushing. He nodded at his men (who looked almost as surprised by his action as Zuko felt like) and run off to the forest, grateful for the excuse to leave in a hurry.

ooo

The situation wasn't as hopeless as Zuko had feared. When he got to the healing facility he knew immediately he'd come to the right place.

The Yu Yan were there as well. Apparently they too presumed the Avatar would leave the same way he'd come from. Instead of following the boy inside the stone structure, they were preparing an ambush for

him outside the main (and probably only) gate to the structure.

Smart. That way the archers were in a good position to run after him if he tried to get away, they had open space and the high ground and the Avatar wouldn't have many places to duck and hide behind.

They had the numbers and they were the best archers known to four nations. They had a good plan. There was one thing that was working for Zuko, though.

He had the element of surprise, and oh boy wouldn't they all be surprised. He could barely believe himself what he was about to do.

Zuko was relatively sure the Yu Yan hadn't noticed he was there. That was probably for the best as well.

They may have keen eyes, but they aren't expecting company. Even if they were, a master ninja always finds a way.

Entering the healing facility undetected wasn't a problem, either. Although there appeared to be no other doors than the now heavily guarded main entrance, the wall was made of rough stones and was a bit fallen apart in places. Ideal for climbing undetected.

One way or another, there was no time to waste. The Avatar had to be warned.

Even if Zuko moved fast and played his cards right, it was unlikely he'd be able to capture the Avatar with all the skilled competition lurking around, but the Avatar getting away would at this point be half a victory anyway.

To Zuko's surprise, although his intel had suggested otherwise, the healing facility wasn't entirely abandoned. Either that or the old lady with the cat was the Avatar's newest traveling sidekick, but Zuko seriously doubted the latter.

"...So this potion will heal my friends?" The Avatar finished his question, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, obviously anxious to leave.

"Of course not! It's for my cat", the old, grumpy healer replied, "What your friends need..."

Zuko was still pretty far away and couldn't quite make out what the old woman said next.

He realized this was going to be trickier than he'd thought.

He could try to sneak up on the Avatar and grab the boy, but if he didn't capture the Air Nomad on the first try, the kid would run straight to the trap waiting outside. Zuko's track record on capturing the Avatar on the first try wasn't impressive, so that was off the table.

If he showed himself and told the kid he wanted to help him and that the Air Nomad should follow him, even the Avatar wouldn't be so naive as to say 'okay, that's a good idea'.

No. He'd probably presume Zuko was trying to set him up and would run to the exact opposite direction. Straight to the Yu Yan's hands. As always.

Unless... that was Zuko's trap.

The Prince didn't have time to plan any further when the Avatar shouted: "Thank you for the advise. I'll go there right away!"

Oh shit.

Aang started running for the door, but so did Zuko, completely abandoning his attempt at not being seen by either side.

Only moments before the Avatar was out of the facility, Zuko jumped forward and managed to grab the boy by his ankle. They both stumbled to the ground.

The Avatar looked more surprised and curious than worried when he wondered out loud: "It's you again!"

Zuko had scratched his knees and hands upon falling and he was still a bit out of breath from the run, but he tried to sound menacing as he replied: "Yes, it's me. Prince Zuko. Here to capture you."

Zuko didn't think he sounded too convincing, the worry blatant in his voice above all else, but he hoped that if the Yu Yan were close enough to hear they wouldn't realize to question the sincerity of his statement.

The Avatar at least didn't notice anything was out of place: "Oh no. Now is a really bad time. My friends are sick and they could be in real danger if I don't get medicine to them as soon as possible. Could we maybe... reschedule?"

Zuko blinked.

What the...?_

He hadn't expected this.

Zuko shook his head, more to himself than the Avatar.

Whatever is going on with Katara and Sokka is going to have to wait. My first priority is to make sure the Avatar gets away. Whether he realizes it or not, I'm actually doing him a favor, because if the Yu Yan capture Aang, he won't be able to go back to his friends at all._

Granted, if Zuko captured the Avatar himself, he wouldn't be able to return to them all the same.

Fortunately, Zuko wouldn't have to choose between capturing the Avatar and making sure Katara and Sokka were okay. Not today. As numbingly odd as it was, today they were all on the same side.

"Well", Zuko got up and shouted, "You'll never be able to get to them because you will not get away from me this time. Especially not in

that direction where the ambush awaits you. Dozens of archers. You'll never escape them all."

The Avatar looked around himself, obviously baffled, so Zuko specified: "In the trees. Over there."

Zuko pointed at where the Yu Yan were waiting in their hiding place. If the archers had been wondering if the Prince was there to help them, they would now, at the very latest, guess the word they were looking for was 'competition'.

Shameless competition.

If Zuko got into trouble for this later, he could always put his treason on incompetence and foolish arrogance. He'd been so sure of the Fire Nation's superiority that he had 'accidentally' revealed their plan to the Avatar.

These things happen.

It wasn't believable but it was plausible. That was good enough for Zuko.

Not the worst thing they could catch me doing.

As the Avatar turned around to look at the trees, Zuko took advantage of the last chance he would get to convince the boy before he would, undoubtedly, start running to some random direction.

"See? The Yu Yan are the best archers in the world. Even you won't be able to outrun them. You know, should you run to that direction."

Actually, Zuko wasn't sure if the Avatar would be able to outrun them should he run to any direction, but he had try something. The other directions were rocky and hard climbs, which was probably why the Yu Yan had been so confident the Avatar wouldn't choose them that they had properly ambushed only the gate area. However, maybe the Avatar, if anyone, would be able to climb the steep cliffs nonetheless and get away.

The Avatar looked worried but determined: "That does sound bad, but I think I'll take my chances. See, the swamp is that way, and the frozen frogs really can't wait."

Zuko stood there gaping at the boy, wondering if he was serious or not, missing that one crucial moment when the Avatar sprang into motion and rounded the gate.

That was all it took for the arrows to start raining down on the boy.

Theoretically, Zuko could've still gone after the Avatar. He might have done exactly that if it weren't for the fact that he had only moments ago promised Uncle that he wouldn't do anything extremely risky and foolish.

Zuko weighed his options. The archers were so good that when they wanted someone alive, they caught that someone alive.

The problem was that they weren't here for him. They were here for the Avatar, and Zuko wasn't sure what they would do if the Prince got on the way.

They wouldn't probably kill me if they could avoid it. Not without a reason. Although, maybe my behavior so far is a reason enough.

They could easily shoot me by accident if I keep jumping in the line of fire. Hell, for all I know, Zhao has given standing orders to shoot Prince Zuko on sight.

No. Of course he hasn't. He couldn't have. Father would never have allowed it.

I may be banished but I'm not the enemy. There's a difference between unwanted and wanted.

The Avatar was somehow able to duck the first wave of arrows.

The second wave, which followed immediately after the first one, the airbender attempted to block with a wave of air, but it didn't work. Several arrows hit him on his shoe, but he wiggled free and kept running.

Of course airbending didn't work.

The Yu Yan weren't legendary for just being a bunch of pretty accurate archers. They were renowned for their uncanny accuracy, but also for their incredible dedication to their art.

They were so one with their bow they could gather great strength into their attacks, making their arrows move fast and hit hard. Some even claimed the Yu Yan could transfer some of their own chi into their arrows.

Zuko didn't know if it was true (the squad wasn't keen on sharing practicing tips to anyone, even other citizen's of Fire Nation) but the logic sounded believable.

The Prince knew from experience that chi could be used for other things than just bending one's element. Bending always required chi, but one didn't have to be a bender to exploit one's chi in a fight.

The Avatar may be the most powerful being on the planet, but he was nowhere near as dedicated and prepared as his opponents were.

Zuko feared the outcome of the battle had been determined the minute it had began, and there was nothing he or the Avatar could do to prevent the inevitable.

He was right.

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To Iroh's horror, Zuko was nowhere to be seen as he and the crew finally reached the healing facility.

There were arrows sticking from the ground, but other than you

couldn't have told a battle took place there only moments ago.

Before Uncle had time to go look for his nephew, Zuko emerged from the woods, running towards them.

Iroh felt relieved. He considered running up to meet the young man and maybe even hugging him, but decided against it as he saw the look on Zuko's face.

Disappointed, mainly, but there was also a burning in his nephew's eyes Iroh knew far too well. Zuko wouldn't give up this easily. This wasn't over yet.

"The Yu Yan", Zuko said shortly and nodded towards the arrows. The three crew members exchanged bewildered glances.

Zuko walked to them and continued his briefing of sorts: "Working for Zhao. They were here for the Avatar."

"Did they capture him?" Iroh asked in a measured tone.

Zuko closed his eyes, but when he opened them, he answered: "No."

"What do you mean 'no'?" One of the crew members blurted out, "This is the Yu Yan we're talking about..."

"Yes, but the Avatar isn't just anyone, either", Iroh reminded them.

He nodded at Zuko who nodded back at him.

They had a mutual understanding. They both knew Zuko was lying.

Uncle believed he could guess why. In any case, he wasn't going to reveal his nephew's bluff.

"The last I saw", Zuko went on, "The Avatar was still running. I'll go after him as soon I'm done giving you these orders."

Even though the Yu Yan had caught the Avatar, whatever Zuko had come back to say to them had to be very important for him to have come back at all. Iroh was curious to hear what had been more important than keeping up a chase after the Yu Yan.

"The Avatar's Water Tribe allies are ill. From what I've been able to gather it's probably the same disease Jiri had."

"The Avatar, caught or running, won't be able to return to them for a while, so I was thinking, uh, that we could... take the Water Tribe kids... as our prisoners. Yes, that's the word. Prisoners."

Everyone looked at the Prince, too astonished to say anything.

Zuko looked uncomfortable: "It makes sense, right? We have medicine for what they've got and experience in treating it, and once they're better we could, uh, use them as Avatar baits?"

Zuko's explanation came out more like a question, but Iroh understood perfectly what he was trying to say anyway.

Uncle was touched by the fact that Zuko had, despite his hurry to follow the Yu Yan, decided to take a moment to make sure his crew had orders and that the Avatar's friends would be taken care of even in the scenario that the Avatar would never return to them.

"Where are they?" Iroh asked simply, as if there was nothing unusual or illogical about Zuko's order-phrased-like-a-question.

"I'm not absolutely sure, but the Avatar kept glancing at that peak", Zuko pointed at a near-by cliff, "whenever he mentioned his friends. They are probably in one of those caves up there."

Zuko appeared to be figuring out what his plan was as he explained it: "I want you to go there and look for the Avatar's entourage. Don't forget that even if the kids are ill, the bison could still be dangerous. If you find them, take them to the ship and treat them. If not... return to the ship anyway."

Uncle nodded at him. He wasn't sure if he liked Zuko's plan but he wouldn't question it in front of the men: "And are we then to stay there and wait for your return? From looking for the Avatar, that is."

Zuko shook his head: "No. Zhao might know where we're docked and might try to make it difficult for us to leave. When you get back to the ship, raise the anchor and sail to the sea. We'll rendezvous at the next port north of here."

Zuko nodded as if the matter was covered and taken care of. Uncle disagreed. He deserved more answers than this.

He walked up to Zuko. The teenager knew what was coming but rather than trying to leave, he waited for Uncle to reach him.

He never did run from a battle, even that of wills.

"What exactly are you planning to do?" Iroh whispered.

"They're taking him to Pohuai Stronghold, so that's where I'm going as well."

"I didn't ask where."

Zuko looked puzzled for a moment, but then he sighed: "I know you didn't want Zhao to get the Avatar, but I think there's still a way we can save this. He could escape. I'll be wearing a mask. They won't know it was me."

Iroh could barely believe his ears: "You're planning to take on an entire stronghold alone as the Blue Spirit, who, if I'm not entirely mistaken, isn't even a bender. Is that your plan?"

For a brief moment Zuko looked surprised that Uncle knew about his secret alter ego and had figured out his plan so accurately, but finally he managed: "...No."

Uncle looked at the teenager with his 'you can't lie to me and you

know it' look.

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose: "Fine, that's my plan. But it'll work."

Iroh sighed.

Zuko lifted his gaze, and Iroh saw something he hadn't expected. There was worry and even a hint of fear in Zuko's eyes.

"Is that it?" the Prince asked.

"What do you mean?" Uncle asked back, genuinely puzzled by his nephew's response.

"I just admitted to you that I'm planning to commit treason. Not some small trick that might keep the Avatar, our nation's number one enemy, from our Navy's reach. No. I'm going to infiltrate our base and break him out. I'll probably have to fight our own soldiers to do that. What I'm planning to do is... wrong."

Uncle wasn't sure what to say. He knew that nothing he could say would take away the nagging doubt. He'd gone through something rather similar after Ba Sing Se himself.

Questioning things you had always believed in was necessary, but although it got easier with age and experience, it was never easy.

Iroh wished he could just tell Zuko it was okay, that he'd done his best and that was all that mattered, but he didn't.

Too much was at stake and even if Iroh would've been able to forget about his responsibilities towards the world and put Zuko's life above all else, the young prince wouldn't have done the same. He would have gone through with his dangerous plan anyway.

Zuko had made his decision and all Uncle could do was support him in it. He would, just like he had always been, be there to help his nephew find his own way. If today that meant attacking a stronghold...

"I know you better than anyone, so trust me when I tell you that you're not a traitor. You want to do what's right, do what's in the best interest of those you care about..."

Zuko cut in, shaking his head: "Yes, I am. I'm not going after Zhao because it's the right thing to do or anything that noble. I'm going after him because if Zhao wins I can truly never go home again or prove my worth or... And I'm not even sure if I still want to go back, it's just that for so long it was all I wanted, the only thing that made keep going make sense..."

Zuko's voice broke a bit and Iroh seized the moment: "Right and wrong aren't always simple to determine. No one, not even the Fire Lord knows everything. No one can know what the right thing to do in every situation is. All we have is our hearts. If your heart tells you to help the Avatar to escape..."

Iroh closed his eyes: "...Then that's what you should do."

"You don't think I should do it", Zuko said solemnly.

"Only because I'm worried for you. That's the only reason. You already know where I stand on the issue at large. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing wrong about what you're doing. In some situations it's difficult to determine what's the right thing to do, but this isn't one of them. However, the decision is yours and yours alone."

Zuko nodded. After a while he said: "I have to go."

"I have a few more questions before you go. Purely practical stuff", Uncle put in, "What do you really want us to do with the Water Tribe kids?"

Zuko looked uncomfortable: "Truth be told? I don't want them as my prisoners."

Iroh had guesses as much.

"I just thought that since I or Zhao will probably end up holding the Avatar, someone had to go get the kids. But I don't want them. The Avatar is the one I need. I don't... They're really young and not very skilled fighters."

"We should go get them but we can't hold on to them. If I capture the Avatar I might have to go to the Fire Nation first thing to get away from Zhao, and then they might end up along as well and then we might have to keep them as prisoners. After I've got the Avatar they wouldn't agree to escape without their friend and we might have to give all three to the Fire Nation..."

"Perhaps it would be simpler if, after they have made a full recovery, the Water Tribe siblings were to... escape. On their own", Iroh suggested. Zuko nodded.

Iroh was rather excited by this part of Zuko's plan. It provided him with unprecedented possibilities.

Should be interesting to get to know Katara and Sokka a bit better. And who knows, with little luck, the Water Tribe siblings might learn a thing or two about their pursuers as well...

"Then to my second question", Uncle returned to the situation at hand, "This harbor up north. I'm not going to even ask how you plan on getting there, but I am a little curious as to how you were planning to drag the Avatar along as well. Wouldn't it be easier if we stayed here and waited for your return?"

"No. I thought about that, but the problem boils down to Zhao knowing where the ship is or at least being able to find it pretty quickly. After I showed up here he'll know I'm up to something and he might put two and two together and come looking for the Avatar from the ship. Even if the Air Nomad isn't there, he'll find the Water Tribe kids and I don't know what he'll do with them but..."

"I understand. Though... do you really have to go after the Avatar all alone right away? Since it stands to presume he's been taken to Pohuai Stronghold, and our ship is almost on the way there, could you

not come with us back to the ship where we could... plan further?"

Zuko looked a bit apologetic but unwavering: "I already lost the Avatar once today because I wasn't fast enough to get to him. I don't intend to repeat the mistake. For all we know, Zhao plans to ship him to the Fire Nation right away. Also..."

Zuko sighed: "I don't think it would be wise to put me and the Avatar's bison in close proximity. I doubt the animal would even let that happen."

Uncle saw that Zuko had given his plan more thought than he usually did, which was at least of some small comfort.

"Which leads us to my final question and perhaps the most important of them all: what exactly are we to do about the ten-ton bison?"

ooo

Zuko was running across the woods for the second time that day. The sun was slowly setting behind the mountains, throwing long shadows all around him.

Zuko had with him his Dao, some rope and a satchel containing his sneaking outfit. Again, he was grateful for having realized to bring his Blue Spirit gear along that morning.

Perhaps a part of him had known he would end up attacking Pohuai Stronghold from the get-go, and had been okay with it.

Another part of Zuko missed his old life. Not the one where he lived in a palace. Sure, a considerable part of him missed that, too, but right now he missed, above all else, the certainty with which the banished but determined Prince Zuko had handled things.

His life had been so much easier when all he was expected to do was follow orders and capture the Avatar and then his life would've been better. Of course, now Zuko knew it had never been that simple, but a part of him still wished it had.

Somehow, even after learning what his father had been willing to do to him when he was only ten years old, Zuko hadn't given up hope.

Hope that one day, he and Ozai could get along. That they could be... a real family.

It's all I ever wanted.

Zuko sighed. In the light of recent events and the journey he was about to embark on, the odds of that happening seemed more distant than ever before. Still, odds and rational thinking had nothing to do with hope.

But Zuko wasn't a child anymore. He knew that just because he wanted something to be a certain way didn't mean it ever would be.

Maybe it was due time to find new things to want.

A flash of movement caught Zuko's attention. He immediately froze in place, listening for sounds of someone moving near-by. He heard nothing.

He quickly hid in an exceptionally dark shadow thrown by a large oak.

Zuko almost laughed to himself when he realized that his reaction to what ever was out there was not that of Prince Zuko but that of the Blue Spirit. At least getting in the right state of mind shouldn't be a problem.

Then he saw it again. A shadow moving across the path.

Zuko looked up and, upon recognizing the massive figure hovering above him, he stepped out of his hiding place.

"You", Zuko said and pointed at the large white dragon spirit, "have some explaining to do."

()))()

****A/N****

This is a first chapter of what will be at least a three-parter. Kinda went overboard with the length, but there is so much going down right now and so much explaining to do...

Again, credit where it's due:

'Praise makes good men better and bad men worse' is apparently by Thomas Fuller. I read it on a sign outside a Buddhist temple and though it sounded like something Uncle would say.

20. Breaking Free

****Breaking Free****

Zuko knew people were supposed to address spirits respectfully, but it had been a long and a frustrating day, so he didn't have patience for polite. Plus, he and Tuli were kin. Her words, not his.

As far as Zuko knew, being kin excused a lot. Never had for him, personally, but to others it seemed to do that.

Tuli didn't look offended, though. Or surprised. Instead she offered one of her whiskers to Zuko.

Impatient cub, Tuli sighed.

Where have you been? Zuko demanded to know. If you can just drop by any time you feel like then why haven't I heard from you for so long?

You've needed my assistance?

Well, there was this really annoying water spirit trying to kill me... Zuko stopped to really think about the question.

Eventually he replied: _ No. I didn't really need your help._

Tuli nodded so Zuko went on: _So... stands to presume that I'm in deep trouble now, right? Since you decided to show up now but not before._

Tuli shook her head: _I can't just show up any time I feel like. I already told you this. I need to be summoned..._

...By a powerful sage, Zuko finished Tuli's sentence for her, _ But I didn't summon you, so who did?_

It's different now. We're connected.

Tuli hadn't changed a bit. Still talking in riddles. Zuko would have to phrase his questions more carefully if he wanted straight answers.

Zuko took a deep breath and tried to remember all that Uncle had had time to teach him about spirits.

'They don't think like we do'. Obviously.

What do you mean by connected?

We're kin by spirit and blood.

The answer sent chills down Zuko's spine: _By.. blood?_

Tuli explained further: _You and I are not of same descendent but all dragons are my kin._

More non-answers. Zuko decided to let the matter drop and focus on more crucial issues.

He wasn't sure how long Tuli would stick around this time, but he had a feeling this wasn't going to be a long visit. Also, even if the spirit did have all the time in the world, Zuko himself was sort of in the middle of something.

Now that we're on the topic: I'm a dragon now? And, for the record, I'm not complaining. Oddly enough, I'm not. Just... curious.

Tuli smiled. Which was really quite intimidating: _Of course you're not complaining. You were always a dragon and you always will be. It's part of who you are. Why would you complain?_

Zuko could think of several things that were part of who he was that he could easily complain about, but that was, again, off the topic. If _he_ got distracted, the conversation would officially start going nowhere.

You mean... I was a dragon even before I turned into one. Dragon at heart. Dragon... in another life time?

The last question came out more as a statement, for the more Zuko thought about it, the more the theory made sense. Except...

_But a lot of spirits must have reincarnated as dragons and then as

humans at some point. Why would the connection matter now? For me?_

Tuli looked serious but not in a scary, upset by your stupid questions, kind of way. More like the way Uncle looked when he was really thinking something through.

You, Tuli finally said, _are a rare exception. _

Rare? Here Zuko had been thinking he was the _only_ exception: _What am I? Am I a dragon? A human? What?_

The question had been bothering the Prince ever since the water spirit had implied he no longer counted as a human. How profound was this change he had so carelessly embarked on?

A Dragon Warrior. That's what humans call what you are.

Zuko had never heard of Dragon Warriors, so the name alone didn't tell him anything new. Except... if this thing that had happened to him was one-of-a-kind, why would someone have named it...

There are others? Like me? Dragon Warriors.

No. But there have been. Many, many human generations ago, everyone knew of Dragon Warriors. They, like real dragons, were respected. But Dragon Warriors were always rare, always exceptions, and when there hasn't been any in a few centuries... humans forget easily.

Something in Tuli's tone told Zuko she had said all she intended on the matter. The Prince made a mental note to ask Uncle about it, and moved on: _Why me?_

Because of your destiny.

That sort of didn't answer the question and at the same time explained a lot. Destiny had always been out to get him.

Also, hadn't that water spirit mentioned something on those lines? About Zuko being a pawn in some great big game?

One way or another, if it was _Zuko's destiny_ that kept drawing spiritual interest to his persona, he had to learn more about it: _What do you know of my destiny?_

Only one being knows your true destiny and that being is you. No spirit, no matter how mighty, can decide it for you.

Tuli was starting to sound like Uncle. 'Find your own way' and all that.

Though, Tuli went on, _destiny is a funny thing_. It does have a way taking you _towards_ certain people and events. _

The Avatar, Zuko said.

_Yes, your destiny does appear rather intertwined with that of the young Avatar, but that wasn't what I was referring to. I meant you and me. The way you found your way to me. Despite the fact that I'm

forgotten and my shrines are no longer worshiped, you found me, and through me, you found yourself. The way you were always meant to be._

Zuko weighed Tuli's words:_ So... I didn't really have a choice. Back when we met and you asked if I wanted to be turned into a dragon. I mean, I didn't understand the details of your proposal at the time but that was what we were talking about, and you asked my permission. Except that I didn't really have a choice, if becoming dragon was something I was always meant to do..._

Out of the blue, Tuli smacked Zuko on the back of his head with the end of her scaly tail. The hit was gentle, considering Tuli's enormous size, but still kind of hurt.

Thick-headed cub. Have you not listened to a word I've said?

_Well, _Zuko replied while rubbing the back of his head_, you're the one who keeps contradicting yourself._

You always have a choice. Always. No matter how much a path is laid before you, only you can choose to take the first step. Or walk some other path available.

Then... I could've chosen not to become a dragon.

Zuko knew he was starting to repeat himself, but he really wanted to get to the bottom of this.

Yes. But then your destiny would have been incomplete.

Says you, but you're not exactly impartial on the matter, right? You have plans for me, Zuko appeared to finally be getting the hang of his own train of thought.

He wasn't angry at Tuli for having been away so long, but because, on a level, he knew Tuli was keeping something from him. Something important about why she was so interested in his progress and destiny. That was the part that had made him act so aggressively from the start.

Yes, Tuli said slowly, _I have plans for you. But they can and will wait until you're a bit more... whole._

Everybody, Zuko realized, has plans for me. Or, at the very least, is out to get me.

I thought you said becoming a dragon completed me?

_I never said that. No one is ever complete. The Air Nomads may have gotten _close_ in their quest for harmony and peace with all living things, but certainly not Children of Fire. Fire is never still. Life is a journey, not a destination._

_So what are we waiting for? _Zuko gestured with his hands, pointing out that they were sort of wasting time_, I'm not whole but I'll never be, right? Why not tell me your plans here and now so I can decide whether I want to be a part of them or not?_

You may never be complete, but you can be whole. They are not the same.

Apparently, the mindset of a spirit was fundamentally based on the notion that playing with words was the best part of existence. Messing with destinies coming a close second.

Zuko sighed: _Why are you here? Obviously not to answer my questions._

Time for answers will come.

But not yet?

Tuli nodded.

So, for the third time: you, here, why?

I come to you with a warning.

_You could've _started_ with that,_ Zuko retorted.

I could have, but an impatient cub had many questions.

Zuko shut his mouth and gestured Tuli to go on. If, for once, she wanted explain something to him, the Prince didn't want to prevent her from doing that. Not even when his instincts told him that whatever Tuli had come to say to him was something he probably didn't want to hear.

There was probably a real reason why she hadn't cut to the chase. Maybe the conversation so far had been Tuli's idea of small talk. Keeping the mood casual and light before getting to the really important stuff.

Tuli cocked her majestic head ever so slightly and then said: _Don't go to the North, to the Land of Ice and Water._

The warning was lot less cryptic than Zuko had expected, but still left questions unanswered: _If this is a warning, aren't you supposed to warn me about whatever bad stuff is going to happen if I go there?_

If you go to the the Land of Ice and Water, I won't be able to protect.

Protect me from what?

No one knows the future, but you have to understand. You're important. Much more important than you realize. But the People of Water... they have a special connection to some very powerful spirits. I fear for your safety.

Zuko sort of appreciated Tuli's concern, but at the same time he was reluctant to agree to any more deals, no matter how much they were for his own protection.

Well, then you'll be happy to hear I have no intentions of going to the North Pole. I'm after the Avatar, and although that's where he's headed, he'll never get that far.

Tuli looked unhappy with Zuko's answer. Her answer was short: _No one knows the future._

Then stop acting like you do!

Zuko hadn't meant to shout at Tuli. She had come to him to offer her help, so the last thing she deserved was being shouted at.

Zuko was just tired. Also, he was starting to get sick of people telling him what he was or wasn't allowed to do with _his_ life.

For a moment, the Prince thought Tuli was offended, but instead the spirit's jaws spread into a wide smile:_ Young and insolent. I like that._

Just like that, the spirit was gone, leaving Zuko alone in the darkening forest.

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The night had fallen by the time Zuko reached Pohuai Stronghold.

The fortress was famous for two things. Firstly, it was the home base to the Yu Yan. Secondly, it was said to be inescapable. A theory Zuko was about to put to a test.

Something was inescapable only until someone escaped from it. That honor would fall upon the Avatar, with a little help from a spiritual intervention of Zuko's own making.

Getting in was easier than Zuko had expected. Obviously he'd done it just the other day without being caught, but he expected there to be more security in place now that the Avatar was in Zhao's custody.

Sure, unlike the last time, the guards on the gate actually looked into the carriage Zuko was using for coverage to enter undetected, but they weren't fast enough to so much as catch a glimpse of the Blue Spirit.

There appeared to be more guards patrolling the yards and the walls than yesterday, but most of the soldiers were gathered on the main square in front of a large balcony. Zuko heard some of them whispering something about a speech they were waiting to hear.

A speech? Never too early to gloat, huh.

The Stronghold had more than one prison segment, but Zuko was leaving from the presumption that the Avatar would undoubtedly be kept in the innermost of them, right in the middle of the Main Building, guarded by all three walls. So that was where the Blue Spirit was headed.

Zuko had to stop several times when guards patrolling the hallways came his way. Zuko figured that he would probably have to take down a few of said patrols once he got closer to the Avatar, or they might hear the sounds of struggle from the unknown number of guards waiting next to where the Avatar was kept, and could alarm the whole base.

For now, though, there was no need to harass anyone. Or let anyone know the fortress had an intruder.

Zuko had perfected his Blue Spirit performance to such heights it was easy for him to be one with the shadows. Tonight he was wearing a lighter, more skintight version of his Blue Spirit outfit (he had several in his repertoire, depending on the climate and the occasion) and he had his Dao swords and several hidden blades on him.

Zuko was more comfortable with his venture to attack his own nation now than he had earlier that day. Perhaps it was to do with the way he always felt more relaxed when he put on his mask and sneaking gear.

The rules and restrictions that applied to Prince Zuko didn't seem to apply to the Blue Spirit. When disguised, he was free.

Zuko ducked to the ceiling and let a guard pass under him. The soldier turned around a corner but stopped shortly after that and knocked on a metal door that Zuko himself had passed only moments ago.

Zuko listened carefully, curious to hear what was going on. Luckily he had a great hearing, a gift he had honed to compensate for his impaired eyesight.

Ever since the Agni Kai, the vision in Zuko's left eye had been blurred around the edges, though he rarely if ever allowed that to impair his performance. He doubted even his crew knew of his disability.

Though, strangely enough, Zuko's sight had been excellent when he'd been a dragon. Yet another side-effect he should probably go over with Uncle.

"Yes?" Asked someone from behind the door. The still shut door muffled the sound a bit, but Zuko recognized the speaker anyway.

"Admiral Zhao", the guard addressed, "The men are ready for you."

A creak as a chair was moved and then some shuffling of papers. Soon after that the door opened and closed. A click of a lock

The Admiral walked right under Zuko, the soldier in tow.

Zuko thought he heard the man mumble something that sounded like 'mustn't keep my audience waiting' under his breath.

The sounds of steps faded away, leaving Zuko with two options. He could stick to his original plan and get to the Avatar as soon as possible. Or he could stop by a room Zhao was apparently using as an office.

Procrastination was always a risk, but the ninja side of Zuko hated to waste such an opportunity to gather intel on his enemies intentions. Now that Zuko knew where Zhao was keeping his things and papers and that the Admiral himself would be busy for at least a few minutes, the temptation to have a look was overwhelming.

Also, as Zhao was be busy giving a self-congratulatory speech, he couldn't at the same time be doing something awful to the Avatar.

That decided it for Zuko.

He backtracked over to Zhao's door and began picking the lock with the thinnest knife he had with him, which was luckily thin enough to easily fit into the bulky metal lock.

Although Zuko's experience in the art of lock-picking was limited in comparison to most of his ninja skills, he managed to make his way into the office quickly enough.

The room was smaller than Zuko had expected. That was perhaps a good sign: this clearly wasn't the type of room Zhao would use to entertain guests, which increased the chances that Zuko would find something on Zhao's secret plan there.

Considering that Zhao had spent only a few days at the Stronghold, it was also possible that he wasn't keeping any of his important documents here but at his ship. Though the Admiral had at least received that letter of promotion the other day. Maybe he'd received other mail here as well.

There were no lights in the room, so Zuko relit a still smoldering torch on the wall.

There were a few shelves on the walls, but the objects on them looked mostly decorative and had probably been there long before Zhao had showed up. Besides a Fire Nation banner on the wall, there was little else in the room than a desk and a chair.

Zuko started with the desk. He eyed the documents but none particularly caught his attention. They were mainly lists of supplies or reports from Zhao's subordinates. Although Zuko might have found them at least interesting on any other day, now he didn't have time to waste on better acquainting himself with what the Fire Nation Navy was up to.

Zuko was actually a bit surprised by the amount of paperwork he found. Somehow, he had expected Zhao to have gotten someone else to do this type of work for him, rather spending his time seeking glory on battlefields. Apparently, the man actually worked pretty hard, and not just on self-congratulatory speeches and letters.

In retrospect, Zuko's presumption had been a little silly. A man had to be doing something right to get promoted to the rank of an Admiral.

Also, Zhao had many flaws, but not giving things his personal attention wasn't one of them.

Even when the Admiral wanted to spy on Zuko, which the man must consider a petty task, he always came around personally. Either he didn't trust his subordinates or he just liked keeping all the strings in his hands. Probably both.

Although Zuko had only gone through less than half of the documents,

he decided to move on.

A man like Zhao wouldn't leave something top-secret just lying on a desk.

Since the room was in Zhao's use only temporarily, it was unlikely there were any hidden compartments.

Zuko got up and went to the shells. Instead of picking objects at random, Zuko lit a small flame in his hand to better see if there were markings on the dust.

As he had suspected, no one had cleaned the shelves in a while. And as he had hoped, one of the vases had been moved recently.

Zuko put out the flame in his hand and picked up the vase from the top shelf. There was nothing under it. He looked into it. There was a roll of papers tucked inside.

Aha.

Zuko went to the door and listened. As he heard nothing, the Prince decided it was safe enough to quickly go through his findings.

Zuko walked to the desk and pulled out a thin stack of papers, which he rolled open and laid flat on the table.

To most people, the papers would've looked to be about the exact same topics as the ones left in the open had been, but one of them immediately caught Zuko's attention. He pulled a single sheet of paper out of the stack carefully like it was fragile or precious.

The characters on the paper were well-executed but they looked a bit rushed and lacked the even quality of a letter written by a high-ranking court clerk. Zuko knew it was from the Fire Palace, though, and not just because it had the Royal Seal.

It was his father's handwriting.

Although Ozai had never personally written a letter to his son, and he rarely wrote anything personally, period, Zuko would've recognized his determined yet unpolished calligraphy anywhere.

Every line was drawn with the care you would expect from someone who had been given a classical training since they were old enough to sit still, but obviously lacking true passion for the art. It wasn't like Azula's writing, which was as perfect as everything she did, or like Uncle's stylistic and beautiful calligraphy. Instead Ozai's handwriting was a lot like Zuko's own.

Zuko felt numb.

Finding a letter from the Fire Lord from the belongings of an Admiral wasn't anything out of place, but the fact that his father had written this letter personally made it special, and not just because it most likely contained such war plans that were too important and secret for the eyes of a clerk.

Naturally, the Fire Lord usually only signed letters from him, and

even those usually with a seal. Still, in Fire Nation, protocol was never so important that it overcame caution.

Healthy amount of paranoia was a good thing, right?

The letter wasn't special to Zuko because it was something unheard of.

It was a letter from home.

Ozai hadn't sent Zuko a single letter since his banishment. Not that Zuko would've expected him to. Still, in a way, this letter was the closest they'd come to communication in almost three years.

This piece of paper contained his father's wishes and opinions that had surprisingly often remained mysteries to Zuko even before his banishment, and he felt a twinge of envy because the letter wasn't meant for him.

Ridiculous, a more rational voice inside Zuko's head reminded him, _The letter isn't _that_ important. You don't even believe in your father like you used to. You should move on before someone realizes you're here._

A more prominent part of Zuko wanted nothing more than to read the letter, no matter the risks of prolonged stay. And not because it was likely to contain information on Zhao's secret plan.

Even after all these years, after all he's done to me, I still hang on every word.

Zuko slumped his shoulders, for a little while letting his hesitation show. Then he started reading the letter.

_Commander Zhao, _

We, the Fire Lord, ruler of the mighty Archipelago of Fire Nation and her Colonies, conqueror of the Eastern Coast and the Middle Planes of the Old Kingdom, devastator of the Southern Barbarians, leader of the civilized world, holder of the Dragon Throne, here-by make Our will known.

All official letters from Fire Nation Nobles started with a list of merits. The longer the better, so naturally the Fire Lords list of accomplishments was lengthy. They weren't of course all things that his father had personally achieved, but represented the deeds of all the Fire Lords before him as well. In practice this meant the list could've been endless but, probably because Ozai had had to write the letter by hand, he'd gone with a relatively short version, only mentioning some recent highlights.

Although almost every letter started with the exact same introduction, no noble would've been so dumb as to just skip over it. The list was a way to send silent messages to the prescient. Mentioning a very old, new or just otherwise not usually included happening gave the letter a different undertone, the mentioning working like a code key, helping to decipher what was said between the lines.

Since this letter's introduction held no big surprises, Zuko presumed

this was a down-to-business type of message. Most likely to do with the war. He read on.

We congratulate you on your recent victory at the battle of Lohjun Bay.

We will take into consideration your proposition. The esteemed War Council will gather to discuss it, and after the resignation of Council Member Fuxang, the proposition to place more troops in the North should face no resistance.

Troops to the North? That was a bit surprising. Zuko couldn't think of any even mildly important targets in the Northern regions of Earth Kingdom that hadn't already been conquered or squashed. Maybe that base under General Fong, but that seemed like a very odd undertaking for the time being. There were more important targets, more imminent threats. Like... the Avatar?

Zuko hoped whatever it was that Zhao had needed more troops for had nothing to do with the Avatar or Tuli's ominous warning, but unfortunately the letter said nothing more on the topic.

The matter regarding the rebellious Eastern county of Bak Lu will be handled accordingly: the pockets of resisting forces are to be located and crushed. We permit you to use any means you deem fit to reach this goal. Any and all citizens who have participated in the resistance or have aided it may be sentenced to prison time or death without a trial.

The raids to supply lines 6 and 7 will be put to an end at all cost. The citizens responsible will be disposed off in a way that will send a clear warning to all who may plan on following their example. Apprehending the leaders of the vandal movement referred to as the Earth Kingdom Militia alive for questioning is preferred but not mandatory.

To aid you in these efforts, We have assigned warships Tigna and Amalin of the Southern Navy Department, and their crews of 150 men, under your command. The vessels Captains have been sent orders to report to you at the Kakupa Base in three days time.

The Avatar, a vigilante and an enemy of the Nation, is to be apprehended at the earliest possible hour and to be brought to Azulon for trial by the Dragon Throne for his crimes against the world.

The Fire Lord's power had many names that held different implication's. The term Dragon Throne was traditionally used when speaking of the Fire Lord's position as a judicial force or a judge.

Zuko had never given it much thought before, but now it made him wonder if dragons had, at some point in history, been considered good judges. Heck, it might even be a direct reference to the Power of Dragons: one way or another, it was logical dragons were used as a symbol of judging a man's past actions and character.

We permit you to use all the means and resources available to you in reaching this goal. The Avatar's persistence to elude capture is a disgrace and undermines the power of the Nation.

If anyone stands in the way of his apprehension, even the banished Prince Zuko, a member of the royal line, we permit you to deal with the complication as you deem fit. Capturing the Avatar is a first priority.

By the Power bestowed upon Us, We bid you farewell.

The letter wasn't long.

Zuko hadn't had many expectations towards the letter, but somehow he still felt... disappointed. And conflicted and sad and angry all at once.

His father had given Zhao permission to, in essence, consider Zuko as much of an enemy of the nation as the Avatar was, should he and Zhao try to capture the Avatar at the same time.

Zuko knew the Admiral's and his own resources had never been symmetrical.

Zhao had hundreds of warships under his command while Zuko had one beaten ship. Zhao had access to all the reports and information passing through the official Fire Nation channels (and probably to all sorts of unofficial channels as well) while Zuko had to spy on his own nation just to hear what was going on.

But the asymmetry had so far only applied to their resources. Zuko's odds of capturing the Avatar had been worse than those of the Admiral's, but he had had an equal right to try.

Now, according to the Fire Lord's letter, Zhao had a greater legal claim on capturing the Avatar than Zuko did.

It was unfair, but that wasn't the worst part about it. Much worse was what the order implied of Ozai's wishes.

All this time Zuko had thought that his father was being harsh on him to teach him a lesson, but that his true wish was that Zuko would, in the end, succeed in his quest to capture the Avatar, redeem his honor and return home.

It seemed Zuko had been wrong.

The realization was so bad that Zuko didn't even feel angry or sad or betrayed. He only felt numb.

And maybe it was because of that numbness, but the part in the letter mentioning Zuko wasn't the part that bothered him the most.

Zuko had never been particularly interested in the scheming of the court but, having been raised in the Fire Palace, he wasn't unfamiliar with it. As he had both, pre-existing knowledge of the people and places mentioned in the letter and a firm understanding of the intricate language used in formal letters, Zuko could read many things between the lines.

Implied messages and meanings Zhao would have been meant to understand, and which he undoubtedly had understood.

So it were all the silly little things that bothered Zuko. Like the fact that the letter consisted of so many permissions to punish people and destroy things instead of encouraging the Admiral to work towards peaceful solutions.

Zuko knew his nation was at war and wars had casualties, but they weren't at war _everywhere at once_.

After a hundred years, most of the world wasn't putting up much of a fight. This Zuko had learned through experience. All waters were enemy waters to a banished Prince of Fire Nation, but only a handful were truly deadly.

In Zuko's opinion, in those regions that were submitting to Fire Nation dominion, it was their duty to, in return, help build peace and prosperity. Not kill and destroy.

The Fire Lord was the ruler of much of the world and that came with a responsibility towards not only the citizens of the Fire Nation but all those who lived in Fire Nation conquered areas.

The county of Bak Lu mentioned in the letter had belonged to Fire Nation for over a decade. There was still some light resistance there, but majority of the local populace wasn't causing trouble. In there, Fire Nation should've focused on rebuilding, not on witch hunts.

If we more often showed people how great life will be under Fire Nation rule, maybe they wouldn't fight back so hard.

Zuko knew he was probably being grossly optimistic, but the road towards peace had to start from somewhere.

Then there was the matter of the battle of the Lohjun Bay. Zuko would have been hard-pressed to call it a victory considering how many men they had lost in it. Congratulating for it gave wrong incentives.

One more thing caught Zuko's attention in the letter. It was the supposed resignation of Council Member Fuxang. Zuko had attended a War Council meeting only that one faithful time, but he still remembered all the members and had later memorized the protocols.

No matter which way you looked at it, this resignation was completely unexpected and even unorthodox.

A position in the War Council was for life. The members of the War Council were supposed to be able to express all kinds of opinions freely and, to encourage this freedom to disagree, members could not be fired from their position for almost anything short of treason.

Although plucking off members that were causing trouble would've made decision making faster, it wouldn't have guaranteed the decisions were better and it might have endangered the representation of all Fire Nation opinions in important decisions.

Of course, the Fire Lord always had the last word in everything. The Council couldn't tell him what to do. The Council's job was to let the Fire Lord know of different things going on in his nation and

what different groups and counties, namely through their nobility, wanted him to do.

That's what it had been for in a time of peace, anyway, when the War Council was referred to as the High Council. Members of the High Council were usually nobles from such counties that had been loyal to the Fire Lord's line even before the last civil war over three hundred years ago. Before that the Fire Lord had been only one of many regional rulers, but after the civil war, all Fire Clans had been united under one king. Thus Fire Nation was formed.

In a time of peace, Council Members were traditionally chosen from noble families who's counties were small or poor. The principle idea was that those families that had wealth and influence already had a way to get heard, and thus had no need for added political power. This was a good way to keep political power and wealth separate. Also, it was a practical way to ensure no family was so powerful that it could compete with the Fire Lord.

Just like an old wisdom said: _No one should have more power than the Fire Lord._

In a time of war, however, the Council's main focus shifted from inner to outer affairs, and the criteria for new members changed along with it. After a hundred years of war, all members of the current Council had a military background and most of them were seasoned Generals.

Although the Fire Lord held unlimited power in the Fire Nation, if he constantly ignored the Council's recommendations, the nobility might grow restless, feeling their needs weren't being attended to. At a worst case scenario, they could even start acting out, procrastinating with their deliveries or even withholding information on the populace of their counties to complicate the drafts.

Which was why Zuko was both surprised and worried to hear Fuxang had resigned.

The members were free to resign if, for example, their health no longer allowed them to continue in their position, but as far as Zuko knew, Fuxang wasn't particularly old or sick.

Being a member of the Council was a great honor and not something handed away carelessly.

Fuxang was a determined and sometimes even a difficult man, but a man of honor nonetheless. Why would have he resigned?

And why would Ozai himself emphasize the resignation by telling it to Zhao personally, obviously implying Fuxang's opinion on whatever they were planning had been known and unwanted?

In the given context, it almost sounded like Zhao had suggested that Fuxang might be trouble and that Ozai had... dealt with it?

Looking back on Ozai's term as the Fire Lord, the fluctuation of the Council members had been rather great. Even though father had ruled only six years, almost a third of the current Council had been appointed during his reign...

A quiet clanking sound echoed behind the door, drawing Zuko's attention back to the here and now.

He swiftly put out the flame on the torch and listened carefully as someone walked on the corridor. Thankfully, that someone walked on by, not trying to get into the room.

As the sounds of steps faded away, Zuko looked at the letter still in his hand.

An irrational urge to crumble the document, maybe even burn it to ash, nearly took the Prince over. Before he'd have time to change his mind, Zuko quickly folded the hidden papers back into the vase and placed the vase back on the shelf, exactly where he'd found it.

Wanting to destroy the letter was foolish. It would in no way eradicate the messages of the letter, nor would it erase the memory of it from Zuko's mind. It would only serve to let Zhao know someone had been poking around his stuff.

Zuko was already to the door when he realized he wasn't exactly sure where he was going. He had a good guess on where the Avatar was, but should he still go free the boy?

Having learned what Zuko had, he could no longer say he was doing what he was doing because Zhao was a fool who didn't care about the Fire Nation. Not now that he knew the Fire Lord's explicit wishes were that the Avatar would be caught asap, and preferably by Zhao.

In freeing the Avatar, Zuko wasn't just going against the Admiral. He was going against his father.

Should Zuko still do it or not? Should he help the Avatar to escape?

The Blue Spirit opened the door and ghosted past corridors, faster and less careful than before but still silent as a grave. He was in a hurry.

Zuko would mourn the life he had forever lost. He would never become the Fire Lord. He would never see his home nation again. For all these things he would mourn. Later.

Not now. Now there was no time for sorrow. Zuko had an Avatar to save.

()))()

****A/N****

As advertised, the Blue Spirit isn't over in just two chapters. More big stuff, such as what Uncle's up to and how successfully, in the next one. ;)

In this chapter, for the first time, I dig a little deeper into what Fire Nation political system is made of.

Not much is told about that in the cartoon, so I went with something

logical that more or less explained the things we _do_ know about the Fire Nation: they are a people united under a single ruler who is loved by most of his people and, unlike the Earth King, the Fire Lord de facto rules his nation.

My main source of inspiration was Japan on Edo period, when Tokugawa family ruled from year 1543 to 1867. I felt it explained how one family could have grown so powerful and what that family had to do to ensure they would stay in power for generations to come.

In the series, the Fire Lord is treated by his people like a semi-god, so obviously his power is considered to come directly from the spirits. However, I'm sure he's also worked hard to become the sovereign ruler of an archipelago, where people are divided by seas and thus didn't probably always used to have just one king but rather something like the Water Tribes have (each village has a chief).

Since Fire Nation is in much easier climate, their numbers grew to the point where land became something to fight over (and, being a short-tempered people, I'm sure they fought over a lot of other stuff as well). At that point, alliances were made to ensure victory and provinces grew bigger and fewer, until (after a lot of fighting) only one remained.

I don't think the Fire Nation could've become more powerful than the other nations put together if the People of Fire hadn't, even before the hundred year war, had a _lot_ of experience of fighting.

Since the Fire Nation's attack was always described to have come to other nations as a surprise (that's basically what it says in the beginning of each episode), People of Fire must have been fighting one another before that. Competition is a fuel for progress and so on.

But since Sozin described Fire Nation to be prosperous and peaceful before the long war, stands to presume there hadn't been fighting in a while. Which is probably one of the reasons why Sozin started the war:

1. a long peace makes you forget how bad war _really_ is, idealizing it instead, and

2. the Fire Nation must have had some inner power struggles despite a time of peace, so a war was a good way for Sozin to solidify his power and unite his people behind a common cause, or else they might start fighting one another at some point. No matter how much people prosper, they always want more.

So, when I, in an earlier chapter, said that a Fire Lord Arizon banned the Power of Dragons a thousand years ago, it didn't actually have quite the same impact as a current Fire Lord banning something would. At the time, Arizon was a powerful firebender and one of the most powerful men in Fire Islands, but not the only one. The existence of formidable competition also explains why he felt so threatened by a power his line did not possess.

Only later, as Arizon's line rose to ultimate power, the rule applied to all citizens, but by then the Power had already been pretty much forgotten by most, leaving the exception of people like the founders

of the Order, who probably started out under somebody else's rule. Somebody, who wasn't as opposed to the Power, because he saw it as a way to compete against more powerful leaders, such as the Fire Lord.

Apparently, I do not believe in such a thing as too long an author's note ;)

21. New Friends, Old Enemies

21. New Friends, Old Enemies

"So, we've located the Avatar's secret lair. Now what?" Seaman Oki whispered.

The young soldier had a hopeful and expectant look on his face as he turned to look at Iroh. All the three crew members were looking at the old General with looks that represented varying degrees of hopes and expectations.

They are counting on me to know what to do, Iroh realized, _Hopefully I won't let them down._

Prince Zuko had left in such a hurry to liberate the Avatar that he hadn't truly given them instructions other than 'you'll figure something out' kind of statements.

Iroh peeked one more time over the large boulder they where all huddled behind.

Avatar's entourage was still in the cave surrounded by ruins, still exactly where they had been when Iroh and his men had found the place almost half an hour ago. Two people-sized sleeping bags, a lemur cleaning its fur and a ten-ton airbison. The usual group minus the Air Nomad himself.

Now was, indeed, a good time to get creative.

Iroh tried to recall of that he knew of airbison. Admittedly, he had never spent a great deal of time studying the supposedly extinct species, nor had he had many opportunities to do so.

Still, Iroh considered himself quite knowledgeable a man. Surely he knew something that would help them solve this situation peacefully.

Airbison were considered docile creatures. When faced with a threatening situation, their go-to reaction was always flight, not fight. Being the original airbenders, flight was certainly almost always an option for an airbison.

The animals avoided conflict, but not to the point the Air Nomads had. If a bison couldn't escape, or if it wouldn't escape because it needed to stay to protect kin or people it was attached to, it would fight. Considering the creature's size and airbending capabilities, having to fight an airbison was no small effort.

This particular bison, Appa, was certainly so attached to the Avatar that it would, if need be, fight for its owner. It had proven as much

on their first encounter by taking down most of Zuko's crew to get to the Air Nomad.

Iroh presumed that Appa was also loyal enough to extent his caring to the Avatar's companions.

The real question was whether the bison would perceive Iroh and his men as a threat or not.

How smart was it, anyway? Smart enough to recognize them as enemy by their uniforms? Sensitive enough to realize some of them were firebenders? Reasonable enough to be reasoned with?

Iroh just didn't know.

Iroh wasn't in the habit of underestimating beings just because they weren't human, though. He had, after all, met dragons, and knew they were at least as smart as humans were.

Still, presuming an animal was smart wasn't to say it thought or behaved like a human would. Intelligence and a certain type of understanding of what rational behavior was didn't always go hand in hand.

Appa might be smarter than we all know. Probably not smart enough to understand speech, though. Bison probably have their own, non-verbal ways of communication.

Well, it seemed Iroh wasn't getting any wiser by contemplating further. It was good to theorize before acting but there always came a time when the only way to see if those theories were correct was to test them.

"I have a plan. If I'm right, this shouldn't be too much of a problem", Iroh informed the crew.

"And if you are not, sir?" Seaman Juva didn't look convinced.

"Well, we are about to find out. Should it turn out I was wrong, we shall make a swift retreat and re-evaluate the situation from a more comfortable distance."

Everyone nodded. They still remembered how easily the bison had taken everyone down the last time they had fought it.

"Excellent. Wait here", Iroh ordered.

He took a deep breath, got up and started to slowly advance on the bison.

The animal had not moved much during the almost half an hour Iroh had had time to observe it. It was most likely asleep. Which meant that if Iroh wished to communicate with it, he'd have to wake it first.

Well, let's hope you are a morning person.

Even if the bison wasn't, at least Uncle had plenty of experience dealing with people who were grumpy when woken before sunrise. Then again, it was also possible that his nephew wasn't so much a grumpy

morning person than just grumpy, period.

Either way, Iroh had experience.

The old man coughed rather loudly a few times, which got the animal to stir a bit. The bison lifted its massive head, still looking a bit sleepy.

When Appa noticed Iroh he immediately turned to face him. He didn't get up, though, most likely because the two Water Tribe kids were still huddled atop his tail.

"Good evening", Iroh greeted, hoping his friendly tone conveyed that he wasn't an enemy, "I'm Iroh. We have met before, though not under very pleasant circumstances. Today, however, I've come to extend an olive branch, so to speak, by aiding your ill companions."

The bison looked thoughtful and even a bit suspicious, but at least it wasn't attacking him.

Encouraged by the seeming progress their relationship was already making, Iroh took a few more measured steps towards the animal.

As the airbison sniffed the air coming from Iroh's way, Appa's eyes narrowed and he began to growl a low growl, shaking a bit in the process.

_Damn. I guess that means you _do_ remember me._

Iroh lifted his hands in a placating gesture and backed off.

"Appa, what is it?" A weak voice asked from one of the sleeping bags. The dry voice belonged to Katara, who'd apparently been stirred by Appa's sudden movements.

The girl looked up. She looked very feverish and didn't appear to be fully aware of her surroundings.

Iroh stood very still. He had a feeling that Katara being awake would not make his task of gaining Appa's trust any easier. Uncle hoped she wouldn't see him in the darkness of the cave and that she'd go back to sleep.

Too bad, it was exactly then that the lemur decided now was a good time to go have a closer look at the new arrival.

It floated closer to Uncle and eventually landed on top of the older man's head, sniffing him fervently, eyes wide with curiosity. The animal appeared to be unsure of what to make of Iroh, but at least it was acting in a friendly manner so far.

Should have I bathed this morning? Iroh wondered briefly as the lemur climbed onto his arm, still sniffing him all around, _Is there something funny about the way I smell? _

"Momo", Sokka suddenly joined the conversation, "Stop teasing the evil old Fire Nation guy."

The casual way Sokka said this and the blissful smile on his face before he turned around and went back to sleep told Iroh the boy

wasn't really awake. More good luck for Iroh.

Katara, however, was narrowing her eyes. She was a bit more conscious than her brother and now clearly trying to determine what was going on.

Appa was still growling at Iroh. Momo was still acrobating atop him and sniffing him.

What is it about my smell... Oh. Of course.

Iroh realized his mistake.

"Don't worry, my furry friends", he said quietly with his most reassuring voice, "I'm not a dragon. I might _smell_ like one, but only because I live with one."

The lemur looked straight into Iroh's eyes for a long time and then went back to sniffing him.

Yep. The lemur definitely doesn't understand speech.

The bison, on the other hand, stopped growling. It still looked suspiciously at him, though.

Iroh ever so briefly weighed his chances of beating an airbison in a fight, should the situation take a turn for the worse. He certainly hoped it wouldn't come to that, when neither he nor Appa particularly wanted a fight.

Uncle was an experienced fighter, though, and although he didn't want to hurt anyone, he was relatively sure that in a fight he would have good chances of winning.

Most animals from other nations were afraid of fire, after all.

Plan A had worked rather well thus far, considering that the bison hadn't attacked him yet. Still, Iroh doubted that prolonging his conversation with Appa would get him any further.

So, it was time for plan B.

Iroh carefully retreated back to the boulder he and his men were using as a base of operations.

"You are doing great, sir!" Seaman Juva whispered, "I mean, I couldn't hear what you said to them, but they woke up and still no one attacked anyone, so it must have been something pretty convincing."

The other two were nodding as well, and Oki said: "Funny creature. The lemur I mean."

Oki pointed at the animal still resting on Iroh's shoulder. Iroh had to agree: "Yes, not exactly shy, is it?"

"No one can say you didn't try. Now can we retreat back to the ship?" Juva put in.

"Actually", Iroh said calmly, "I still have one more Pai Sho tile up

my sleeve."

Uncle would've been lying if he'd said that the crew looked relieved to hear that. No one complained, though.

"Seaman Oki, do you still have those branches I asked you to pick up on our way here?"

Oki nodded and held out a few branches that had green, almost round leaves on them: "What are you going to do?"

"I don't think I'm going to get in any friendlier terms with the bison just by chatting", the General replied and winked an eye at the men, "But nothing brings people together like food."

Then he turned back to face Appa and walked over to him, holding out the branches.

Iroh walked as close as he estimated the bison would let him, then dropped the branches on the ground, and retreated again.

Appa looked dubious and sniffed a couple of times. Then the bison's stomach growled rather loudly.

Animal that size was always hungry, and Iroh knew the branches smelled exceptionally wonderful. The man waited in anticipation.

Slowly, Appa got up to his six legs, shrugged the children off his tail and took the few steps he needed to reach the branches.

Then he gulped the gift.

A few minutes later the bison's eyes got glassy and tired. Appa laid back down and soon began snoring.

Exactly the reaction Uncle had hoped for.

Years ago, Iroh had made the same mistake. He had come across some leaves that smelled delightful and, wanting to experiment a bit, he had brewed tea from them.

Only later he had learned the plant was a rare kind of Earth Kingdom herb sometimes used by traditional healers as an anesthetic.

Iroh had noticed and recognized the plant earlier today outside the healing facility. He suspected it had once been brought to the area for medical use and had since spread wild.

The plant wasn't dangerous, certainly not one of the more dangerous plants Iroh had tried to put in tea during his first round in Earth Kingdom. Iroh didn't know exactly how effective it was, but a cup of tea brewed from it had put some of his fellow commanding staff asleep for hours, so Iroh was confident a few branches ought to do it for even something as large as an airbison.

The old firebender felt a bit bad for deceiving his 'new friend' in this way, but at least he could take comfort in the fact that his motivations were honorable.

Believe it or not, I'm just trying to help.

Iroh waved to the crew that it was safe to come out of hiding and proceed with their plan.

ooo

Aang was feeling awful.

Getting caught by the Fire Nation had certainly not been on his to-do list, but now the timing, too, was about as bad as it could get.

Even the frozen frogs Aang had managed to collect while running from the archers had unfrozen in the warmth of his prison cell and had abandoned the young Avatar. Despite being an endless optimist, Aang was starting to get pretty desperate.

How am I going to get out this?

Aang heard something. There was some type of commotion going on outside his prison cell. The airbender stayed quiet, trying to hear what was going on.

It sounded like a struggle. It sounded like a fight. And after that... nothing.

The commotion was over as suddenly as it had begun.

The door to Aang's prison opened. A sleek, dark figure slide in and closed the door behind him.

Aang tried to stretch his neck to see who it was. When the figure turned around, he saw that the mystery man had a blue, scary-looking mask covering his face. Or either it was his face, and it wasn't a man at all, but Aang highly doubted the latter.

"Who are you?" Aang asked his mystery visitor.

The masked figure didn't answer. Instead he/it unsheathed a sword that turned out to be two swords. Now Aang was really starting to get worried.

Before the monk had time to say anything more, the figure started to move towards him, his swords swirling and ready to strike. Aang yelped and closed his eyes.

There was a metallic clank as the swords hit home. The chains that had been holding the Avatar 's hands fell to the ground, followed closely by the ones that had been holding his legs.

Aang was stunned: "You... want to help me?"

The figure had already moved back to the door and peaked behind it, making sure the way was clear. Now he waved his hand, obviously telling Aang to follow him.

The Air Nomad didn't know who this masked man was, but despite his scary appearance, it seemed that he wanted to help, so Aang went with him.

ooo

The Avatar was finally in Zuko's custody. Or at least the boy was following him, which was good enough for now.

The Blue Spirit lead Aang down corridors and secret hatches, grateful they hadn't run into anyone yet. The Avatar was fast and even a bit sneaky, but he lacked the experience and arrogance it took to pull something like this off, so the longer they were able to avoid confrontation the better.

While the two youngsters were walking through a sewage in order to go under the innermost wall, Zuko peaked a glance the Avatar's way. The boy looked at him curiously. Zuko turned away and picked up the pace.

Doesn't he recognize it's me? I mean, most people don't, but we met just this morning. He knows I'm in the vicinity, he knows I don't get along with Zhao... surely his list of candidates can't be a long one.

Maybe he knows it's me but fears that saying that out loud might somehow remind me that I'm on the wrong side here and make me change my mind. Though probably he doesn't. I guess it would be pretty hard to picture the kind of man he thinks I am doing anything even remotely like this.

Plus, he's never seen me fight. Not really. Not like this. Not with my Dao.

Although Zuko's focus was mostly on the present, uninvited stray thoughts kept appearing in his mind. Thoughts of Ozai.

The more Zuko thought about it, the more sure he was of what he was doing.

No regrets.

Zuko wasn't regretting saving the Avatar today, just like he wasn't regretting standing up for those soldiers three years ago in that fateful War Meeting.

In the last few years, Zuko had given a lot of thought to that day, especially what he could've done differently. He had tried to understand what part in his actions had been so bad that it couldn't be forgiven.

To this day, Zuko hadn't been entirely sure what he should've done differently, but now it was becoming clear to him.

Now that Zuko had let go of his father, he could look at what had happened from a new perspective. He could finally rise above his undying faith in his father's righteousness and look at things for what they really were.

If Zuko had stayed quiet that day, nothing of any consequence would've changed, because nothing had. The men would've still been sent to their deaths. They would still be dead.

The biggest change would've of course been that Zuko wouldn't have been banished. Not on that day, anyway. So from a causal point of view, Zuko had screwed up. Big time. And he'd paid for it.

However, just because Zuko had voiced his opinion in the wrong way at the wrong place at the wrong time, didn't mean his opinion was wrong.

'What's right is never needless to say out loud', Uncle had said many years ago. Only now Zuko understood what he'd meant.

There were many things Zuko regretted doing that day, but voicing his opinion on the war plan wasn't one of them. He still believed they shouldn't have gone through with the plan.

If one of the things Zuko's banishment was supposed to teach him was that his words that day had been wrong, then Zuko hadn't learned his lesson.

Zuko pulled himself and the Air Nomad to the side when two guards past above them. After the road was clear, he gestured to Aang that they would go above ground now. The boy nodded.

Zuko lifted the metal lid and both boys climbed out of the sewer. They quietly ran to the second wall where Zuko had left a rope hanging.

The boys were about halfway through the climb when an alarm was sounded.

"Look! Over there! It's the Avatar and the Blue Spirit!" A voice called from the yard.

Nor the Blue Spirit or the Avatar said anything. Neither made any move to showcase they were going to give themselves in.

Then someone cut the rope and Aang and Zuko were falling towards the ground.

Here we go.

ooo

Aang did an airbending kata to soften their fall. As soon as they were on the ground, the man the soldiers had called the Blue Spirit took a battle stance.

Fire soldiers were closing in on them from all sides now.

The masked man reacted faster than Aang, which was unusual by itself, but not the only unusual thing about him.

The more Aang thought about, the surer he was that there was something very familiar about the way the small, lean figure moved. He just couldn't quite put his finger on what it was or remember where he'd seen it before.

Aang's own first reaction was to grab his airstaff, but then he remembered it had been destroyed, and he'd left his fans at the camp. Airbenders didn't often fight unarmed (since they always kept a staff

along, there was rarely any need) but Aang didn't let that slow him down.

Aang tackled one of the guards, grabbed the man's spear and turned it into a fighting staff by breaking off the pointy end. Airbenders didn't use lethal weapons.

Before Aang had time to airbend anyone, though, his mystery friend had already created a path to escape by downing several men, and was now running for a gate, waving Aang to keep up.

The fight was very fast-paced and three-dimensional. Despite the enemy's overwhelming numbers, Aang was feeling positive and even a bit excited.

He and the Blue Spirit made an excellent team, constantly having each other's backs. Although his new companion still hadn't said a word, they had a silent understanding of what they were doing.

They were making stuff up as they went, but that style had gotten them on top of the second wall by now, so Aang wasn't too worried.

The Air Nomad swept attackers away with his airbending while the Blue Spirit fought them off with his swords. The blades looked sharp and dangerous, but thankfully his new companion was skilled and careful with his weapons.

The Blue Spirit appeared to be as reluctant to seriously injure or kill anyone as the airbender himself was, which made Aang trust his silent companion more by the minute.

Whoever he is, looks like we have a lot in common.

Suddenly Aang noticed an attacker coming towards the Blue Spirit from behind.

"Look out!"

The swordsman turned just in time and pushed his attacker away with sweeping motion of his hands, swirling with his wrists so that the swords didn't cut in. The soldier flew far from them.

The Blue Spirit turned to wave Aang to follow him, but the Air Nomad was too shocked to move.

Was that... Did he just...

Suddenly all the pieces fell in place.

The familiar way in which the masked man moved. His reluctance to hurt his enemies. And the move he had used a moment ago; it was a _textbook_ bending kata.

The Blue Spirit turned around and noticed Aang wasn't following him. The masked man waved at him furiously, but all Aang could do was stare. Stare and smile. He must've looked like he'd gone mad but he didn't care.

"You", Aang almost shouted, so excited he was, "You're an

airbender!"

ooo

I'm not an airbender.

The Avatar was mistaken or maybe even mad. Those were the only logical explanations to his odd exclamation.

Zuko was a firebender. He wasn't an airbender. He was light on his foot, but that didn't make him an airbender.

"I saw how you pushed that man away with airbending", the Avatar went on, still smiling like a fool.

Surely Zuko couldn't have used his bending without noticing it himself. He was always very careful not to use firebending when portraying the Blue Spirit...

The kid probably just had a wild imagination that was now seeing things the way he wanted them to be rather than the way they were. Zuko had years of experience of that, though never to the point of hallucinations.

The real problem here was that the Avatar was still standing in place. What should Zuko do now? Drag the boy the rest of the way by his collar?

Before Zuko had time to make up his mind, the air was full of arrows.

Shit.

Although most of the arrows were headed for the orange figure, a good number of them were coming for him as well. Aang, apparently finally over his moment, noticed the arrows as well.

Zuko had a plan, but there wasn't enough time to go back to the Avatar or hand signal what he wanted the boy to do. So Zuko pointed at the outer side of the wall and shouted: "Jump!"

Both of the boys were fast enough to get out of the way and behind the solid wall before the arrows reached them.

In the same movement as Zuko leaped over the side of the wall, he sheathed his Dao to free his hands for climbing. Zuko took hold of the ledge of the wall as the arrows flew past him.

Normally, Zuko could've easily taken his body crashing to the side of a wall. Now though, a flash of pain reminded him of the shoulder Toph had injured and that he wasn't supposed to put any extra strain on.

Zuko was able to hold on, but only barely. He guessed the shoulder wasn't dislocated but it wasn't working quite right either. Zuko was thankful that no one could see the pain on his face under the mask.

As Zuko was hanging on, he noticed to his great horror that the Avatar hadn't understood him.

The airbender had jumped _entirely_ off the wall and had landed smoothly on the ground. The boy turned to look at him, looking as confused as Zuko felt.

Both boys appeared to be mentally asking the same question: _What did you do that for? I thought we had a plan._

Now what? Zuko tried to think quickly.

One option was that he'd jump down, too. The Avatar seemed to be expecting that, probably still under the presumption Zuko could airbend. Which he couldn't. Right?

Zuko tried to estimate how long the fall was. Too long. Maybe. Since he wasn't an airbender. Probably.

However, even if he'd survive the fall unscathed, it seemed insane to give up the advantage of higher ground for no better reason than that standing on the wall had made them a bit easier targets for the Yu Yan.

Speaking of which, apparently they weren't all back on the inner wall sending arrows the Avatar's way.

Several face-painted archers were on the ground between the last two walls, closing in on Aang.

Zuko bit his lip. The earlier wave of arrows had been meant to lure them into an ambush.

The airbender dodged the Yu Yan's arrows the best he could, but Zuko had already seen how this dance would end. He had to go to Aang's help.

Suddenly two arrows nailed Zuko's left leg in place by his trousers.

Oh shit.

If it weren't for Zuko's years of ninja training, he would've been trapped as soon as more arrows reached him. As it was, Zuko was able to wiggle free and roll back on top of the wall to safety.

Temporal safety, at least. Any minute now more soldiers would storm his current location, though.

Zuko lay flat, holding his injured arm on top of his torso, trying to even his breathing.

_Is this how it ends? Was I an arrogant fool to think I could steal the Avatar back from the most powerful nation in the world? Should I just cut my losses and try to get out here while _I_ still have a chance to get away?_

Zuko opened his eyes.

No. I'm not giving up.

This isn't how the story ends.

ooo

Ari was on the ground, ready to block the Avatar's way if he got past the three members of their squad of twelve that were actively on him.

The airbender was fast, but there was no doubt about how this would end. The Yu Yan had already succeeded in capturing the Avatar once. They would do it again.

Now they even had the advantage of knowing their enemy, and although the Blue Spirit was an unknown factor, it was nothing a trained squad working as one couldn't handle.

They had already managed to drive the Avatar to a trap, and as soon as the airbender was caught, they would go after the thief. He might have slipped away from them for now, but he wouldn't get far.

Suddenly, a colorful light in the corner of Ari's eye caught her attention. Although she knew she wasn't supposed to let the Avatar out her sight, she looked up. She had to know what the flash of light had been about.

Since Ari was the only one on her squad who looked up, she was also the first to see it.

The black dragon.

He's back!

The Avatar had been running along the wall in order to avoid being shot at from all four sides. Now the dragon breathed a thin stream of fire between the airbender and the Yu Yan.

Now everyone saw the dragon, but they appeared to be at a loss of what to do about it. The dragon landed on the scorched ground, its eyes never leaving the Yu Yan.

Its enemy.

No!

Ari had to stop her squad from attacking the dragon. She whistled to get their attention and did the hand signal for standing down.

Ari hadn't told their commander Colonel Shinu about her miraculous savior. Partly because she had feared the man wouldn't have believed her, but mostly because dragons had been hunted near extinction and Ari hadn't wanted anyone to go looking for this one.

She hadn't kept the secret from her squad, though. An important part of why the Yu Yan were better than anyone else was that they moved as one, and for that to be possible, they had to know each other really well.

The other archers knew Ari had been saved by a dragon, this dragon, and she hoped that her signal was enough to tell them what she wanted to happen next.

The leader of their squad, Hozir, nodded at her once. They understood. A life debt was a personal matter, but if Ari's debt meant she had to go against her orders, and quite possibly against her team, they would rather work as one or not at all.

Ari's debt wasn't the only reason they were so willing to stand down. It was no secret that Colonel Shinu, their real commander, hadn't wanted them to be involved in the hunt for the Avatar to begin with, but Admiral Zhao had pushed his rank on the matter.

Also, just because firebenders had hunted down the last dragons didn't mean everyone hated them. On the contrary: in Fire Nation culture, dragons had always been respected. They symbolized many fortunate things. Ari wasn't alone with her wish for the last dragon to live.

In almost unison, all twelve Yu Yan lowered their bows. Not all the way down, in case they might need to defend themselves, but not aiming at anything, either.

The dragon had reluctantly turned its attention away from the archers and to the Avatar. It was now eying the boy in such a meaningful way that even the airbender got the hint.

"You want me to ride on you?" The Avatar sounded half surprised, half thrilled.

The dragon nodded, but instead of lowering its head it grabbed the Avatar into one of its paws, the same way it had lifted Ari on the first time they had met.

In the same movement, the black dragon opened its massive wings and took off. Not a single arrow was fired to try to stop it.

Ari felt both, relieved and worried. Relieved that his savior hadn't been hurt, but worried for getting herself and her entire squad into trouble.

More soldiers and the rest of the Yu Yan arrived on the yard between the two outer walls.

Ari made her decision. She would take the blame for the Avatar getting away. She wouldn't let her entire team go down for this.

"What on earth happened?" Admiral Zhao had reached the yard. He wasn't happy.

"There was a dragon, sir", Hozir stepped up, "It took the Avatar and flew away."

Zhao looked like he was boiling: "Yes, I saw the dragon. Everyone did. The part that amazes me is the part where the dragon calmly flies away. Meeting minimal resistance, might I add."

Ari opened her mouth to speak but Hozir was faster: "Couldn't get a clear shot, sir."

Zhao looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. While the

Admiral was still looking for strong enough words to describe his feelings, another Yu Yan inauspiciously stepped next to Ari.

She brushed Ari's hand to get her attention and whispered: "Not a word."

"The Yu Yan are supposed to be able to shoot wings off a fly without killing it. How could you not hit something that big?"

"I saw the situation", the field leader of the Yu Yan stepped in, "and Hozir is right. It was an impossible angle. With the smoke and the heat distorting the visibility, no way were they..."

"I could've hit it if I'd been holding a bow and an arrow!" Zhao shouted, looking a bit deranged.

"Even if there had been enough time for an attack, my Yu Yan's arrows wouldn't probably have made a dent in the armor of a dragon", Colonel Shinu, the real leader of the stronghold, said very calmly and rationally, "The Yu Yan are the best, but we couldn't possibly have trained for this scenario. We just weren't prepared for this."

Ari was too stunned to say anything. They were all teaming up against the Admiral to save her.

ooo

Zhao was back in his office, packing his things. He had ordered his ships to sail off first thing the next morning. There wasn't a minute to loose.

The Admiral found it incredibly unlikely that the Yu Yan had simply been too dumfounded to do anything about the dragon. One or two, maybe, but an entire squad?

Their sudden incompetence was a bit too coordinated to be anything but planned. What Zhao needed to know was who had been the father of that great idea. His money was on Colonel Shinu, that jealous, unpatriotic fool, but he couldn't openly accuse the man without proof.

Zhao had interrogated the archers, but the Yu Yan's 'red wall of silence' had kept Zhao from finding the culprit. As much as he would've wanted to, he couldn't have all of the Yu Yan court-marshaled. They were far too valuable for the war effort to be locked away.

The worst Zhao could do was write very negatively about them in his next report.

"Sir" a young officer bowed to the Admiral.

"Yes", Zhao hurried the man to go on.

"You asked us to keep looking for the Blue Spirit. We've just completed a search on the stronghold and the near-by forest, but there's no sign of the thief", the man visibly hesitated, but eventually went on, "None but this."

The soldier handed Zhao a blue opera mask. The mask was smiling at

him, menacing and playful. Everyone was laughing at him today, it seemed.

Zhao set the mask on fire.

Although the mask was evidence and a possible lead, it had obviously been left behind on purpose, so it didn't probably hold any real leads to the identity of its wearer. Though mainly, he burnt it because he felt like destroying something.

Zhao dismissed the terrified soldier, who left in a hurry.

Zhao was very much convinced that all the hardships of tonight; the 'Spirit', the dragon, the silent mutiny, were connected. He couldn't yet see, let alone prove, how, but when he could, heads would start falling.

If I have learned anything today, Zhao thought to himself, _it is that I will _never_ use the Yu Yan again. No matter how talented they are, they can't be trusted, which makes them of no value to my hunt for the Avatar or the conquest of the North._

ooo

"Mmhhh", Sokka mumbled but he didn't open his eyes. Someone was pushing his shoulder, but he didn't want to get up just yet.

"A few more minutes, mom", he said and turned to his side.

"You're awake? Finally", Katara was next to him, trying his forehead for fever.

"Hey", Sokka yelped, surprised by the touch.

"Sokka, you have to get up. We are in trouble", Katara looked very worried.

"What?" Sokka got up to a sitting position and looked around himself, but all he could see were dark walls, "Is someone attacking?"

"No", Katara said solemnly, "We are a bit late for the fight."

Sokka had no idea what his sister was talking about. He still felt weak and tired, and Katara wasn't making any sense.

Upon seeing her brothers blank expression, Katara sighed in irritation and continued: "You honestly don't remember _anything_ about the Fire Nation attack on our camp?"

"We've been attacked by the Fire Nation?"

"Yes. And now we are held prisoner by Prince Zuko."

Sokka stared at her sister: "Prisoner? You sure?"

Katara rolled her eyes. Despite her defiant attitude, she, too, looked very pail, clearly still not fully recovered from the disease.

"Of course I'm sure. Look around yourself. We are in a prison inside

a Fire Nation warship."

Sokka took another look around himself. The room they were in was, indeed, made of metal. It was a small room with just one door and no windows.

Still, it didn't really look like a prison cell. There were shelves all over the walls, and most of them had stuff on them.

The objects on the shelves were bags of varying sizes. By the smell of them at least some of those bags held spices or herbs in them.

"And you are sure we are on Prince Zuko's ship?" Sokka asked.

"It was the old firebender who always travels with him that apprehended us", Katara replied dryly.

We are locked in Prince Zuko's food closet.

Sokka wouldn't have believed it if he weren't seeing it with his own eyes.

Suddenly Katara looked miserably: "When I realized what was happening, I tried to put up a fight, I really did. It's just... I was so tired and I didn't have any water left..."

"It's not your fault, sis", Sokka hurried to console her, "What now matters is that we figure out a way to escape as soon as possible."

Sokka took one more look around to see if there was anything in the room that could be used for escaping.

There were two mattresses and their sleeping bags, but besides the bags, Sokka couldn't see any of their stuff in the room.

"Hey wait a second", Sokka's brain was working a bit slow today, "where is Aang? Or Appa? Or Momo?"

"Aang left to get medicine for us, remember? But he never came back. Something awful must have happened to him. I don't know where Appa or Momo are, either."

Katara looked even more miserable: "Prince Zuko probably caught them, too."

Sokka thought that over in his head, but something didn't add up: "I'm... not sure about that. How long was I out?"

"I... I think it is next morning, so a day", Katara said.

"And how long was Aang gone before we got attacked?"

Katara looked thoughtful: "Most of the day. Aang left during midday. It was already dark when the Fire Nation attacked."

Sokka nodded: "Well then it doesn't really sound likely that they would've captured Aang."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you remember what that Shyu guy said? Prince Zuko needs to capture the Avatar to get unbanished. Why would he capture Aang and then stick around for hours to look for us, too?"

"Maybe he knows we wouldn't have rested until we would've saved our friend", Katara's eyes had a tough edge to them.

"Yeah, maybe", Sokka agreed. They had, indeed, once already gone after Zuko to save Aang.

"One way or the other", Sokka went on, "the best thing we can do now is to find a way out of here. We won't be of much help to Aang locked up in a food closet."

Katara nodded: "Any ideas?"

"No... but I'll work something out. We'll get out of this, you'll see", Sokka promised.

"One more thing", Sokka added, "The door is locked, right? You tried to open it but it wouldn't budge and all that...?"

Katara glared at him.

"Hey, just making sure."

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Zuko had flown through the night, but now the sky grew lighter, reminding him of the time. He started to eye the scenery beneath him, looking for a place to land.

The Avatar had spent what had felt like hours trying to talk him into going back for 'his friend the Blue Spirit' and his sick Water Tribe friends, but now the boy had finally fallen asleep.

Zuko had tried to communicate with Aang that his imaginary 'airbender' buddy and Katara and Sokka were all safe, but all his attempts had failed.

Zuko wasn't sure why, but his Power of Dragons was really off right now. He hadn't been able to communicate anything at all despite several tries. Zuko suspected the Avatar hadn't even noticed his efforts, so weak had his attempts been.

Although Zuko was exhausted and injured, he had kept going because he feared that when he stopped, he would no longer have the energy or the determination to get up.

Zuko wasn't feeling too good. Maybe he, too, had caught some kind of illness.

Still, he couldn't stop. Not now. Not when he had finally captured the Avatar.

He couldn't go back to the ship, though. Not like this. Not when Zhao was lurking around.

Also, he had ordered Uncle to set sail. Zuko wasn't even entirely sure where he himself was, let alone how to get to his ship. His vision was a bit blurred from the sides.

Still, he couldn't just let the Avatar go.

Zuko saw a mountain. It was as good a place as any to land. Its slopes were steep and bare of trees, so at least he wouldn't run into anything.

Only after landing Zuko realized that his injured left front paw couldn't hold his weight and, since there was no way Zuko was letting go of the Avatar he was holding in his right front paw, he had no front paws left to stand on.

Zuko's long body fell ungracefully to the ground, waking up the Avatar in the process.

"Oh, we've landed. Great. Mind letting go of me now?" The Avatar, ever the optimist, asked.

Zuko was barely awake, so he didn't have energy to even attempt to reply, but he figured his actions would speak for themselves. Or more precisely, the lack of them.

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****A/N****

To be continued.

I'm not sure why in the series the Yu Yan didn't try to stop Zuko and Aang from escaping the Pohuai Stronghold (before they were outside the place, that is), but in this fic they did. Also, why Zhao never used the Yu Yan again was left a bit unanswered, but in my mind those two things weren't _unconnected_ ;)

And what is Zuko's plan now? He doesn't really have one. He's in a pretty irrational state and holding onto a few key ideas that have kept him going that far, not stopping to question whether they are still current.

I'll say this much: Zuko's sudden illness is to do with his recent breaking free of his father. Letting go it easy. Not when you're Prince Zuko it isn't ;)

Lots of plot lines left open, I know, but like I already said, there's so much happening right now that explaining it is going to take more than one chapter.

Hope you enjoyed this one anyway. Reviews are appreciated.

22. Children of War

****22. Children of War****

Zuko wouldn't cry. He wouldn't.

_Azula was snickering next to him. Zuko tried to pay no mind to

her._

Ozai looked disapproving, disinterested even. Zuko briefly wondered which was worse.

The young Prince felt soar and tired, but he got up nonetheless. He had to get this kata right before Ozai would leave or punish him or both.

His father was a busy man. He didn't have time for failure. He didn't have time for Zuko.

The Prince was eight years old. Definitely old enough for this level of firebending. He could do this. He didn't have a choice.

Zuko took a deep breath. Then he moved his hands and feet the way he'd been shown, and finished the move with a decisive jumping kick.

No fire came. Zuko had done everything exactly right this time, but still he hadn't produced even the smallest flame.

Ozai didn't say anything. Zuko didn't dare to look up and face him. He didn't have to look to know what his father was thinking.

Disappointment. Insolent coward. No son of mine.

Even so, Zuko wouldn't give up. He'd prove his worth.

The Prince got up, preparing to try again, but suddenly Ozai spoke.

"_Prince Zuko."_

Now he had to look up. For a moment the child hoped that his father would tell him something that would help him complete his task, but the look on his father's face erased that hope.

Father looked furious: "You have betrayed me."

Zuko's fear was starting to show and his voice came out like a plead: "No! Let me try one more time. I promise to get it right this time. I promise to be a better son."

"_You have betrayed me, your own father, your Fire Lord", Ozai's voice boomed in the empty stone hall. _

Suddenly, the hall wasn't empty as fires rose all around them, surrounding them.

_Azula giggled: "Oh Zuzu, did you really think that you could _ever_ be good enough to be forgiven what you are? You aren't even a firebender."_

Now it was Zuko's turn to be furious: "Of course I'm a firebender!"

Azula always lies.

To prove Azula wrong, Zuko tried to call a flame to his hand, but none would come.

Panicking, Zuko tried to draw a flame from the fires around him, but again to no avail.

"_Father never even wanted you to succeed!" Azula chimed, "And why would he? Why would anyone want you?"_

Zuko, now ten years old, looked around himself, trying to find something that would make things better. That was when he saw Ursa standing at a doorway, outside the circle of flames.

"_Mother!" Zuko called for her, but although Ursa looked directly at him, she didn't say anything. She just stood there looking at him with a blank expression on her face._

Ursa lifted her hand and, for a moment, Zuko thought she would come to his protection after all, but instead she pulled a curtain to block the doorway and herself from view.

Zuko turned around very slowly to face his father.

Now it was only him and Ozai in the circle of flames.

"_Please", a 16-year-old Zuko pleaded, "Don't do this."_

"_There is no mercy for traitors", Ozai's voice was cold and heavy like water._

The stone floor under Zuko's feet crumbled and he fell into icy cold salt water.

The water was so dark Zuko couldn't see where he was. All he could do was try to get to the surface. He needed air.

When Zuko already thought he could swim no further, that the numbing coldness would devour him completely, his hands touched something.

There was a thick sheet of ice covering the surface. Zuko tried desperately to heat it but, again, no heat would come. He was as cold within as he the water all around him was.

That was when Zuko saw movement. There was a dark figure standing on the ice. Zuko put the last of his strength into banging the ice to get that somebody's attention.

The figure looked at Zuko. It was the Blue Spirit, smiling at him menacingly.

No!

Zuko's long, scaly body could no longer keep fighting against the water pulling him down. Cold and alone, the dragon sunk further into the abyss.

"_This isn't how the story ends."_

Uncle.

Zuko looked around to see where the old firebender was, but saw no one.

As his vision began to blur, he could make out something. A light was there with him.

It was a boy. A boy with glowing, blue tattoos.

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The dragon was shivering with fever.

It isn't over yet, Zuko reminded himself through a hazy half-sleep, _There's still work to be done. This is no time to rest._

Zuko forced his eyes open.

It was still very early in the morning. He couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour or so.

Zuko lifted his head. He had landed on a treeless mountain slope somewhere inland. From this vantage point the dragon could see far into every direction.

There was a village at the foot of the mountain but, as far as Zuko could tell, no other signs of human habitation. That was good. He didn't want company.

The Avatar, Zuko suddenly remembered, _I caught the Avatar._

He lifted his neck a bit more to look at himself and, sure enough, the Avatar was still in his grasp.

The Air Nomad looked quite tired but he was awake nonetheless, eying Zuko curiously. When their eyes met, Aang's face spread into a smile.

"Oh good. You're awake. I was starting to get worried. You didn't look too good. Did you have a bad dream?"

I don't know, Zuko thought to himself, _I'll tell you when I wake from it._

"I used to have those, too. Nightmares. I was feeling really down because I'm all alone, and it's my fault. I ran away and got lost in a storm and because of that there was a hundred years of war. It was my job to prevent it but I wasn't there. I betrayed everyone. My people are gone, and it's my fault."

Zuko didn't know what to say. Not that he probably would have been able to say anything as the connection his Power of Dragons created still felt, somehow, disconnected.

He had never thought the Avatar blamed himself for the death of his people. Surely the kid had to see that there was nothing any one 12-year-old could have done to prevent it, Avatar or not. It wasn't Aang who was to be blamed for the death of the Air Nomads.

_For a lot of other stuff, sure, but not for that. That one was all

on the Fire Nation's conscience._

It was odd. Zuko had always thought that he knew the Avatar, that he understood the boy. Now he wasn't so sure.

Having spent three years searching and getting to know his enemy, Zuko knew of the Avatar. But he knew nothing of Aang, and he was only now beginning to see what a significant difference that was.

The Avatar wasn't just a representative of the world or even of his element; he was a person. A human being with worries and hopes and regrets. He made mistakes. He had a past to haunt him.

The Avatar continued, now noticeably happier: "But I don't have those nightmares anymore. You know what really helped?"

Letting go of the guilt?

"Telling my friends about how I was feeling. It didn't erase my problems, but the burden is easier to carry when you don't carry it alone."

For a long while, neither youngster said anything.

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Iroh was rather pleased with how his task of aiding the Water Tribe siblings had played out so far.

While Appa had been dozing off, Uncle and his men had carried the children out of the cave and on board their ship. The lemur Momo had voluntarily accompanied them, too.

Katara had stirred a bit while they had been on the way, but the girl had been in no condition to even stand, let alone to put up a fight.

She had struggled ever so feebly, but had soon gotten too tired to keep up even that amount of resistance.

Iroh had attempted to tell her that her efforts were uncalled for because he didn't mean any harm to them, but to no avail. Either the girl hadn't heard or believed him.

Now, with the help of the medicine Sergeant Cho had provided, the children were making a speedy recovery, but they were still not fully healed.

They had been left into the medical bay, though the room had been emptied of most of its usual accessories, such as knives and other sharp objects. Even the customary Fire Nation banners had been temporarily removed from the walls as a courtesy to their new guests.

Yet, despite his best efforts, Iroh feared his guests were far from comfortable or enjoying their stay.

He sighed.

The guard Iroh had posted outside the medical bay door to monitor the

situation had just sent word that now both kids were awake.

The ship wouldn't make land for a few more hours, so there was still some time for the children to recuperate. And also for Iroh to get better acquainted with them.

Iroh got up and began walking towards the medical bay. He was undecided what would be the best way to approach the upcoming conversation.

Iroh would have gladly told the Water Tribe children that they had nothing to fear from him. Unfortunately he couldn't. So long as it was Zuko's wish to capture the Avatar, and so long as Iroh would stand by his nephew and the children by their friend, it would be a lie to call the relation between them friendly. Even though the children were far from prisoners, it would've been very deceptive of Iroh to imply they were now allies.

Iroh didn't personally have much against the Water Tribe youngsters. Not any more than what he had against all people who wished his nephew harm.

He hadn't yet had a chance to speak with them himself, so his idea of them was largely based on Zuko's descriptions.

For someone who had such poor people skills, Zuko was remarkably good at estimating people (especially when those people were his enemy and he may have to fight them). Also, Zuko was not in the habit of giving unfair accounts, so Iroh had a good deal of faith in the given descriptions.

According to his nephew, the Water Tribe boy Sokka was a young and inexperienced fighter, but what he lacked in experience, he compensated for in innovativeness.

As far as Uncle knew Zuko had saved Sokka not only once but twice: the first time from a fall to Arctic Ocean, the second from the Earth Kingdom Militia. His nephew's actions made Uncle proud, but also Sokka's actions had been much to the boy's credit.

Sokka had gotten himself in trouble trying to save a Fire Nation soldier.

It wasn't an easy thing to let go of your grudge and to rise above it, not even when it was for the sake doing what was right. Sokka, however, had demonstrated exactly this type of honorable behavior, setting him worlds apart from people who couldn't see or reason beyond their own pain.

People like the Water Tribe girl Katara, it appeared.

Zuko had been rather reluctant to speak of Katara much, but the few things he had mentioned, and especially the girl's past actions, spoke volumes.

Apparently Katara had suffered a painful loss at a very young age. A loss she irrationally blamed herself for, Iroh wagered.

It wasn't healthy to dwell in self loath. Iroh knew this from experience. But unfortunately Katara demonstrated her sadness and

anger mainly through vengefulness, which was almost as deconstructive for the spirit and often even worse for other people in her life.

It seemed Katara was rather prone to simplifying both the world and the people in it, which, in essence, allowed her to believe the world would be better off if the Fire Nation archipelago sank into the ocean.

She craved vengeance for her mother's death, and to Katara it didn't appear to matter whether the people she were punishing were guilty or not.

Iroh was no stranger to personal loss. After the death of Lu Ten he had never been quite the same. So he really did understand where Katara was coming from.

It was never easy to let go, but it was necessary.

For the world to be able to start healing, the people in it needed to do the same. That was how the world could be saved: not through more hate and destruction.

Still, the thought of people like Katara having such a great influence on the spirit of the world was not a comforting one.

Iroh didn't know the Avatar very well, either, so he hadn't yet made up his mind on the Air Nomad.

Iroh believed that the world needed balance, and that the Avatar might be able to help in providing it. Then again he also knew that it was not a given that Aang would be a force fighting for harmony.

The boy may not had ill intentions, but he was, as Zuko had pointed out many times, young and reckless. Sometimes even to the point of callousness.

Recklessness was a common flaw in the young, and one Iroh hope would get better with age and maturity.

However the Avatar's power level and his willingness to take an active role in the world even before he was sure of what was the right thing to do were very alarming features.

Yet Iroh was not sold on the idea that the best way to make sure the Avatar wouldn't hurt anyone was to lock him up. Rather the young man needed the right type of people around him. The type that would support him and contradict him and guide him along his journey.

The true difficulty was finding the right people.

Spirits knew Iroh had made his share of mistakes, but he also liked to believe he had learned from them. He himself might have been able to provide the Avatar with, if nothing else, plenty of wisdom that came with age. But only if the boy would listen and take his advice to heart.

However, Iroh running off to join the Avatar was not something he was even considering.

So long as Zuko considered the Avatar an enemy, Iroh would not betray his nephew by teaming up with the young monk. Too many people had already abandoned Zuko because they thought he wasn't important enough to be loved, or just simply didn't need them _the most_.

Iroh couldn't and wouldn't hurt his nephew in that way.

Not even if the balance of the world was at stake.

Iroh knocked on the medical bay door despite knowing it was locked from the outside.

It never hurts to be courteous.

ooo

The Avatar spoke again, apparently still unfazed by his companion's silence: "So, talking about friends... I'm not sure if you heard me earlier but there's sort of somewhere I have to be. So could you let go of me? Or, better yet, take me back to my friends. Without my glider, the trek back is going to take forever and, to be honest, I'm not even entirely sure which way I'm supposed to go."

That makes two of us, Zuko thought wryly.

_Why _did_ I bring us here? I was supposed to rendezvous with my ship in a _harbor_ town. Why didn't I stay close to water?_

Zuko could barely remember what he'd been thinking when flying here, so maybe he had just instinctively decided to land somewhere secluded and safe, far from people.

The dragon was still not feeling okay, but he pushed the nausea away. This was no time for feeling under the weather, so he wouldn't.

Zuko knew he would have to get up and start doing something, but he was reluctant to do it anyway. The rocky earth beneath him felt warm and welcoming.

He felt like a spring flower facing the sun, drawing in its energy. Except that he wasn't drawing his energy from the weak morning sun but of the ground he was laying on.

_ 'Under the soil, earth and fire are one in a never-ending dance'_, Master Kurita's voice reminded Zuko.

This area is volcanic, Zuko realized.

That can't be a coincidence. My instincts must have brought me to recuperate in a habitat most natural to a dragon.

And Zuko _was_ feeling a bit better. But also agitated. By what, Zuko could only begin to guess, but now he was sure something more than his usual determination had woken him up.

Something was going on. This place was no longer safe.

"Uhm, Dragon. About letting go of me..." But that was all the Avatar had time to say before Zuko had made his decision.

The dragon opened its wings and flapped a few times with them as if testing how much they could hold. After Zuko was convinced he was well enough for a short flight, he stumbled up and away, rising to the air.

"Oh, we're moving again", Aang pointed out the obvious, "Are you taking me back now?"

Wow. Gotta give this kid some points for being a good sport. Most people wouldn't be quite so understanding if they'd been kidnapped by a dragon. For all he knows, I could be on my way to my nest where my hungry cubs await.

Then again, I haven't been exceptionally hostile so far, so maybe that has lead him to the conclusion that I'm friendly. I did sort of save him.

Zuko had saved Sokka as well. Maybe the Water Tribe boy had told on him. That might explain the Avatar's casual attitude.

Zuko was still feeling slightly dizzy, so he took only as much altitude as was necessary to get a good look at the top of the mountain.

To get a look at the volcano, if Zuko's hunch was correct.

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"Did someone just knock on our _cell door_?" Sokka was pretty sure his hearing was failing him.

Seeing the vary look on Katara's face, Sokka realized he hadn't just imagined it.

Before they had time to ready themselves more, the cell door opened and in walked a familiar old Fire Nation soldier.

Katara had been right. They _were_ being held captive by Zuko.

"Good morning! I do hope you are feeling better", the soldier said enthusiastically, "We have met before, but I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm Iroh."

Iroh paused his speech and smiled at Sokka and Katara expectantly. When neither said anything he went on.

"And your names, I believe, are Sokka and Katara. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance", Iroh placed his fist to an open palm and bowed his head down in a formal Fire Nation greeting.

It occurred to Sokka that the man who had introduced himself as Iroh was alone in the room with them. He quickly weighed their chances of overpowering him.

Iroh looked pretty old, but then again if he was a firebender, he was probably some kind of firebending master.

_Maybe even _Zuko's_ firebending master_, Sokka realized. That guy did seem to always follow the angry jerk around. Watching closely but not really intervening.

What decided it for Sokka was that the door had been locked behind Iroh. Trying to take the man down was definitely an option, but not one they should try so long as the door was locked.

Sokka turned subtly to look at Katara, trying to make eye contact with her in order to convey his thoughts. Unfortunately, she wasn't looking around, her eyes never leaving the old man.

"What have you done with Aang?" Katara spoke up, her tone accusing.

Iroh looked thoughtful, though he was obviously not surprised by Katara's question.

Slowly, he said: "I don't believe I've done anything to the young Avatar, nor do I know where he is."

"You're lying", Katara hissed, "We both know Zuko's been out to get Aang since the day we met."

"A lot longer than that, actually", Iroh corrected her, "But just because my nephew is under orders to apprehend the Avatar, it does not automatically mean that I were to know anything about your friend's whereabouts."

_ 'My nephew'? I didn't know they were related._

Now that Sokka was thinking about it, he realized that Zuko and Iroh did have some family resemblance.

_ Though if this guy is Prince Zuko's_ uncle_, what does that make him in relation to the _Fire Lord?_

_ Probably nothing. Has to be from mother's side._

This guy just didn't give Sokka the 'brother to the most powerful firebender in the world' vibe.

"What about Appa and Momo?" Katara went on, "And don't tell us you have no idea where they are because they were right _next to_ us when you snatched us."

"I assure you that your animals have not been harmed."

Sokka didn't know what kind of game the old man was trying to play, but he wasn't going to play by his rules.

"Look", Sokka cut in, "you can quit this whole interrogation business right here and now 'cause we ain't going to tell you anything."

"Actually", Iroh was still smiling politely, "I came here to check on your health. And to ask if you would like something to eat."

"Why? We are your _prisoners"_, Katara objected.

"And we are in the habit of feeding our prisoners in the Fire Nation", Iroh said sincerely.

"Well, don't bother. We are not going to eat anything you bring us", Katara crossed her arms defiantly.

"Sis, you sure? I mean it's probably not going to be poisonous or anything 'cause if they wanted us dead, they could've found easier ways..." Although Sokka understood Katara's idea of rejecting anything they were offered, he didn't agree with it. Their odds of escaping would increase if they were in full health and properly fed.

Also, Sokka was really hungry, and the idea of turning down a free meal sounded deranged, regardless the food's origin.

Iroh turned his beaming smile towards Sokka: "Indeed, the food is not only safe, but also delicious. Seaman Sarto exceeded himself. We so rarely have visitors on board."

As much as Sokka hated to agree with a Fire Nation guy, he said to Katara: "You hear that?"

Katara didn't say anything. She just turned to look away, and eventually sighed in defeat.

"A meal it is", Sokka said to the soldier.

"Wonderful", Iroh said and knocked on the door twice.

The door opened again and another Fire Nation soldier walked in. He was holding a tray in his hands.

"I apologize for the lack of beverages. A necessary precaution, I'm sure you understand", Iroh smiled, took the tray and placed it before him and Katara.

The food smelled mouthwatering, but Katara looked at it like it was somebody's dirty old sandal.

"Thank you, Seaman Li", Iroh dismissed the other soldier, who left the room.

"Why doesn't he just come himself?" Katara asked, "Or are we too far below his royal notice? Funny. That didn't appear to bother him when he was threatening our village earlier."

Iroh lifted his eyebrow: "You are referring to my nephew, Prince Zuko, I take it? Actually, I 'm rather certain that he would've come here to personally pay his respects if he was present. I understand why you don't think very highly of my nephew, but I assure you that, enmities aside, he is an honorable young man who wouldn't want to cause you any unnecessary grief."

Zuko wasn't aboard the ship? That was good news. If the Prince wasn't here, he couldn't use his mindbending on them.

Probably wasn't good news for Aang, though.

"So, he's somewhere out trying to capture Aang", Sokka guessed.

"I'm not exactly certain where..."

"Of course!" Katara exclaimed, "You are going to use us as baits to lure Aang into a trap!"

The old man blinked. Twice.

When Iroh finally composed himself, he not-so-subtly changed the topic.

"Oh here I am rambling on about my life while the food is getting cold. I should hate to keep growing teens from their daily nutrition any longer."

With those parting words Iroh left the room.

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"Oh wow, it's an active volcano!" Aang exclaimed, "It looks really dangerous."

Smoke had begun to rise from the smoldering lava. The black dragon was still holding him in his paw as they flew over the crater of the volcano.

Suddenly a thought occurred to Aang.

"Is this why you brought me here? To see the volcano?"

The dragon was silent as usual.

Still, it made sense. The dragon had saved Aang from the Fire Nation, and it had earlier saved Sokka from the Militia, so it was clearly a friend. Why else would it be holding on to him than to make sure Aang would be where he was needed the most?

"There is a village near-by. We have to go there and warn the people that the volcano is active", Aang said determinately.

As the Avatar, it was his job to prevent exactly this type of catastrophes. The more he thought about it, the surer he was that the black dragon had known about the volcano and therefore been so adamant about dragging him here.

The dragon did one more sweep over the crater and then turned to head into the direction of the village.

They got to the village at a speed that would have made an airbison look like a slow means of transportation. The dragon landed in the middle of the town's main street.

As it was still rather early, there were only a handful of people on the street.

They all looked astonished to have a dragon and an Avatar land in their midst.

Just before landing, the dragon let go of Aang. Aang used airbending to land softly next to the dragon.

"Listen to me!" Aang shouted to the people around him, "I am the Avatar, and I have come to warn you. The volcano next to your village

is very active, and it might erupt any minute now. You have to evacuate as soon as possible!"

The villagers whispered to one another, but they didn't seem all too concerned.

"Didn't you hear me? You have to leave, and soon", Aang repeated himself.

Then one of the villagers stepped forward and said: "It's alright. Mt. Makapu won't erupt. If it was going to, Aunt Wu would have foretold it. So we have nothing to fear. Just like I have nothing to fear from your dragon. If I was to be eaten by a dragon today, Aunt Wu would have certainly mentioned such an unusual destiny."

All Aang could do was gape at the man. He could have sworn the dragon rolled its eyes.

"Look, it's a nice dragon. It won't eat you. The volcano, on the other hand, isn't nice at all..." Aang kept ranting, but the villagers had returned to their duties, none of them paying any mind to him or his warning.

Aang didn't know what to do. He turned to the dragon: "They won't listen. How can I warn them if they won't listen?"

He was starting to feel desperate. This time he was where he was needed, and yet there was nothing he could do.

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A part of Zuko was considering taking a bite of a villager just to prove a point.

What's wrong with these people? Don't they know that the only constant in life is that it is unexpected?

For example, yesterday Zuko could have never pictured himself where he was today.

Zuko had to capture the Avatar. He knew that. It would be the safest thing for everyone.

And he would do it. As soon as the village was safe.

As irritating as the villagers were, they didn't deserve to die a horrible, needless death.

Zuko couldn't save the village alone.

He was too tired, too weak, and with the Power of Dragons still mysteriously 'off', without means of communication. And as unheard of as it was, the Air Nomad seemed to be the only other reasonable person in the vicinity. Zuko needed the Avatar's help.

The boy turned to look at Zuko: "Perhaps I should go have a word with this Aunt Wu? Maybe she can help me convince these people that the threat is real."

Zuko nodded, which caused the Avatar to stare at him for a while.

Perhaps the boy hadn't so much counted on him understanding speech than had rather been talking to himself.

Zuko wondered if that took any weight away from the rather meaningful conversation they had had earlier.

Probably not. It wasn't Aang's fault the talk had been pretty one-sided. It was Zuko who was too weak, too inept, to participate.

To the Avatar's credit, he recovered quickly, and then said: "Okay. We'll do that, then."

As Aang stopped a villager to ask for directions, Zuko realized that part of the aversion he was feeling towards the villagers was actually envy.

Most of him despised these people for the lack of control and responsibility they took for their own lives.

A part of him, however, envied the certainty with which they believed in these prophesies. There was a great deal of comfort in having blind faith.

Zuko wondered when had it been that he had stopped believing in his mission. Why was his heart no longer in it?

Why was Zuko not sure whether he should capture the Avatar or not?

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Katara focused as hard as she could.

There were tons of water just outside the ship. She knew it. She even thought she could feel it, just like she'd been able to bend water that she couldn't see when helping Jet.

But no matter how hard Katara tried, she couldn't bend the water in the distance. Nor could she feel any water sources closer to her than the waves outside; quite possible the Fire Nation soldiers had been clever enough not to leave any liquids in the vicinity.

It was incredibly frustrating. Katara was tired of being such a bad bender. She just couldn't get it right.

"Sis, you okay?" Sokka suddenly asked, "You look beat."

"I'm fine", Katara lied, "I was just... trying to see if I could bend the water outside the ship."

Sokka nodded: "Any luck with that?"

"No", Katara sighed, and added bitterly, "I'm just not good enough a bender."

Sokka came over to her and wrapped his hand around her shoulder, saying: "Don't be too hard on yourself. I'm pretty sure not even waterbending masters can bend water from such a distance."

"What makes you say that?" Katara wondered.

"Well, you remember how Gran Gran used to tell us of the waterbenders of the village, and how they got taken away by the Fire Nation?"

Of course Katara did.

"The Fire Nation must have some way of imprisoning benders", Sokka went on, "Seeing how they imprison earthbenders got me thinking that they probably did something similar with waterbenders. Which lead me to to think about how dry must a cell be to be waterbender proof, especially on board a ship."

"I don't know the exact limitations, but something tells me the Fire Nation does. So I'm guessing they have taken that into consideration when preparing a cell for us, too."

Katara nodded, and suddenly found herself sobbing against her brother.

Sokka hugged her tighter.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up. You know me, me and my big mouth. But it's okay. I won't let them hurt you. Or take you away. I promise."

Katara couldn't find her voice, so she just nodded.

Her whole life had been shadowed by the fear that the Fire Nation would find her and take her away. Take away the last waterbender of the Southern Tribe, just like they had taken everyone before her.

And if Katara let them take her away, their mother would have died for nothing.

And it seemed that now her fear was closer to becoming reality than ever before.

"Shh, don't cry", Sokka whispered, "We'll think of something. We'll get out."

Clank.

Wait. That sound. Wasn't it the lock? Was someone coming in?

Both youngsters turned to look at the door, expecting something to happen.

But nothing did.

The siblings exchanged a look, after which Sokka got up and went over to the door.

Katara, too, got up. She wiped her tears on her sleeve. She had to be ready for whatever would happen next.

Sokka made eye contact with his sister and mouthed silently a countdown.

Three, two, one.

Sokka pulled at the door, and it opened.

They were both ready to fight the guards outside their cell, but it was unnecessary.

There were no guards.

There was only one living thing on the corridor.

Just outside their cell stood Momo, looking dazed and holding a piece of fruit in one its paws.

"Momo!" Katara quietly exclaimed, "He must have opened the door for us. You are the smartest pet ever!"

She took a few steps and embraced the furry creature.

"Yeah", Sokka said, "I guess he's a lot smarter than we ever gave him credit for. Well done, you!"

Sokka, too, petted the lemur's head.

"Though I would've expected there to be a guard outside our door..." Sokka pondered.

"They are probably having a break or something", Katara suggested.

"Yeah, maybe. Ever the more reason for us to hurry, though."

Katara nodded, still holding Momo in her arms.

"Follow me", Sokka whispered.

There were several doors on the corridor. Sokka tried some of them, but most were locked. Only one door, the door at the end of the corridor, was open.

They snuck over to that door and Sokka opened it slowly.

Behind it was a large storage room the height of more than one floors. The space had two levels to it: the bottom floor, which was the size of the entire area, and an upper floor, which was only a few bridges passing over the bottom floor.

The door they had opened lead to one of the upper bridges, which in turn lead to another door across the room. So far the route was clear.

The only problem was that there was a group of soldiers huddled around a small fire on the bottom floor.

Sokka quietly closed the door and turned to face his sister.

"We can't go that way", Katara whispered.

Sokka shook his head: "Don't think we have much of a choice. Look, the room is really dark. We'll be quick and quite. They won't ever

know we were there."

Katara didn't like it, but Sokka was right. It was the only way.

She nodded, and then turned to whisper to Momo: "You hear that, Momo? We've gotta be quiet now. Real quiet."

Sokka reopened the door and slowly stepped on the metal ramp.

The ramp gave a quiet squeak.

Every hair on Katara's neck shot up. Both children held their breaths, waiting to see if any of the soldiers below had heard.

Thankfully, the soldiers were engaged in a rather loud conversation themselves and obviously hadn't heard a thing.

Sokka went down on his knees and waved Katara to do the same. When they distributed their weight like that the metals on the bridge were under less duress at once and squeaked less.

Also that way the light from the fire below wouldn't hit them, casting suspicious-looking shadows.

Sokka and Katara began very slowly to advance towards the door on the other side of the ramp.

Katara had only been half-listening to the conversation below them when a familiar name caught her attention.

"...Prince Zuko is going to get himself killed before he hits seventeen, if you ask me", a soldier commented.

"Aye. Who knows where he is right now, for example? He was supposed to meet us here and now we've already been docked an hour and there is no sign of him yet."

"I do hope nothing bad has happened to him. He's a good kid deep down. Saved us from that water spirit and all."

"But what I don't understand is what on earth could make capturing the Avatar so important that he is constantly willing to put his own life on the line like this?"

"Yes, my nephew can be a difficult man to understand, but I believe there is a story I could tell you that might make it a bit easier", a familiar voice suddenly called from the shadows, causing both the soldiers below and the children above to startle.

"General Iroh!" one of the soldiers got up and greeted.

"Oh, don't get up", the old man ushered, "I couldn't help but to overhear what you were talking about, and I'd like you to know that even though my nephew can sometimes be a bit secretive, even to the point of rude, he doesn't mean it as an insult. He's just a very private person."

Sokka signaled for Katara to hold still for a while. It had gotten considerably quieter in the room now that everyone was waiting for

Iroh to continue.

"But if you'd like, I could tell you a story that at least in part explains why my nephew takes his mission so seriously."

As the other soldiers nodded, Iroh continued: "This is the story of how and most importantly why Prince Zuko was banished at the age of thirteen..."

Katara was surprised to find herself practically leaning over so as to hear every word of the story that followed.

She kept advancing behind Sokka whenever there were appropriately loud periods in the story, but her true focus was on the discussion below.

Today she would finally learn what became of the little Fire Nation boy she'd seen in her dream.

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****A/N****

To be continued.

23. The Bigger Picture

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Katara wasn't sure what to think of the story she had just heard.

She had always known there was almost nothing the Fire Nation wasn't capable of, but it still sounded impossible that the Fire Lord would've done all that to his_ own son_.

There was one think she was sure of, though.

I can never look at Prince Zuko the same way again. Literally. Not now that I know where the scar is from._

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At the beginning of the story Sokka had tried to hurry Katara on, but then he'd gotten wrapped into it himself, too. Now neither of the kids was in particular hurry to crawl the rest of the way to safety.

Although Sokka knew they had to keep going eventually, he also knew this was once in a lifetime opportunity to learn more about their enemies: Prince Zuko, the Fire Nation, the Fire lord. All the people and stuff they would have to figure out how to defeat.

Since Iroh was the Fire Lord's brother and apparently a General, he if anyone knew secrets about the war and might slip something invaluable.

Hell, before today, we didn't even know the Fire Lord's name, let alone anything about his familial relations. We've already learned

a lot of important stuff._

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"So that's how Prince Zuko got the scar", one of the men gathered around the fire exclaimed.

Yes, Uncle thought, _Zuko has carried _many_ scars with him since that day, some more visible than __others._

"No wonder the Prince is so determined to capture the Avatar. It's the only way he can return to the life he used to have", Lieutenant Jee said seriously.

Iroh realized his story, under the circumstances, might have been a bit misleading: "Yes and no. For along time, Prince Zuko's desire to go home was his main source of motivation, but it isn't that anymore."

"My nephew has slowly grasped what I've known since that faithful Agni Kai: that his life can never return the way it was, not even by capturing the Avatar", Iroh explained.

"Is that why he's been so different lately?" Seaman Oki's question caught Iroh completely off guard.

The reason to Zuko's weird behavior wasn't just one thing or another, but Oki's guess was so close to the truth that Uncle didn't want to contradict him.

"That, among other things, has certainly played a part", Iroh hesitated for awhile, wondering how much he was in a liberty to tell them of Zuko's recent discoveries.

Zuko trusts them, Iroh reminded himself, _He trusts the crew, that is. The Water Tribe siblings, on the other hand... well, he'll forgive me._

"Another reason is that Zuko has recently learned more of another event from his past. One that has haunted him for years: his mother's disappearance six years ago when Zuko was only ten", Uncle continued.

"That is another long and eventful story, one I cannot share with you today, but one that has altered my nephew's outlook on his life and nation forever."

"I can't believe Zuko has been struggling with all this stuff, you know, his father banishing him, his mother disappearing, but he hasn't said a word about it to us", Juva said, looking more puzzled than accusing.

"Like I said, my nephew is a very private person. He has the tendency to carry all his problems alone, which I fear has lead him to become quite burdened and lonely. However, he has made some significant progress on that topic lately", Iroh concluded on a happier note.

As a response he got a lot of agreeing mumbling and nodding. The crew had noticed this change as well.

"If you don't mind me asking..." Jee started hesitantly.

Iroh gave him an encouraging look, so the man went on: "I was just wondering... You said that going home used to be Zuko's number one reason for wanting to capture the Avatar, but that it isn't anymore. Can I ask what is? You don't have to say if it's something sensitive or secret..."

Iroh smiled at the man. He was very grateful to the Lieutenant for having brought up that topic.

Uncle would've shared that story with them even if they hadn't asked because there were certain people present who seriously needed to hear it, but he was happy to know that the Water Tribe siblings weren't the only ones in the room who were curious to learn why Zuko was still after the Avatar.

Also, it was very important to say out loud some cold facts about Aang and his adventures. If Iroh had said these things to Katara and Sokka directly, they would've accused him of being a liar. Since the children were currently hiding behind pipes, they wouldn't be able to stop him.

Trying to open up somebody's eyes to what the world was really like was a tricky task for several reasons, the most prominent being that people only heard what they wanted to hear.

If they were told something that was drastically different from what they were used to believing in, they didn't believe a word.

If you wanted to teach someone a lesson they didn't want to hear, you had to ease it on them slowly. Iroh had been doing exactly that on his nephew for years, and now it was time to extend that courtesy to the Water Tribe siblings as well.

They were, after all, in dire need of someone opening their eyes to the fact that the world wasn't as black and white as they wanted it to be.

If Iroh had earlier simply sat down with the children and told them everything he had 'accidentally' slipped to them here, or even given them some reasonable advice, they wouldn't have believed him. In the worst case scenario, Iroh speech would've only strengthened their old beliefs.

Both children had been brought up to believe that the Fire Nation was evil to the core. Therefore they presumed all Fire Nation people were bad guys with no redeeming qualities. No wonder they thought all of Fire Nation might as well sink to the ocean and the world would be no worse for it.

This was not an uncommon belief about your enemy in a time of war, especially when the war had lasted generations and the beliefs about your enemies awfulness had become what people grew up hearing.

Something learned as a child could stick with you for the rest of your life, no matter how many facts and proofs indicated that your original presumption was incorrect.

_ 'Katara thinks all Fire Nation people are bad and that bad people always lie'_, Zuko had told Iroh after their first meeting with the Avatar and the Water Tribe kids. Iroh had seen with his own eyes that his nephew was right, and now he was determined to fix the situation.

_The only way Zuko or I can ever have a reasonable conversation with the Avatar's gang _ (and Iroh had a strong feeling there would soon come a time when that was necessary) _is if they are willing to hear us out._

For that to be possible, the Gaang had to first see their pursuers as people, human beings, rather than just something very evil.

Which was why Iroh had gone through the trouble of orchestrating a situation where the Water Tribe siblings were provided with a seeming choice whether to learn more of Zuko's past or not.

As Uncle had hoped, they had been unable to resist a chance to hear Iroh out when they thought he had no intention of letting them hear this.

Why would a bad guy lie to other bad guys?

Uncle had been quite puzzled on how to arrange such a situation, but not for long. This was, after all, in no ways out of his league.

The lemur had proved quite useful in convincing the children that they had escaped on their very own.

Iroh had contemplated whether it was possible to actually teach Momo how to open locks, but since there wasn't much time, he had settled for teaching the lemur to sit tight long enough for it to appear plausible that the animal had opened the lock.

The kids had obviously bought into it, quite possibly because they couldn't picture a scenario where their evil captor had let them go on purpose.

All in all, everything had gone exactly according to his plan.

Iroh had found a perfect way to tell the crew some long due hard facts about their traveling companion and, simultaneously, make Zuko look more human in the eyes of his enemies.

Speaking of enemies...

It was due time Katara and Sokka heard the Fire Nation point of view on the Avatar.

"Indeed, although Zuko no longer has misconceptions about returning to his old life, he is no less determined to capture the Avatar. The reason for this is that, although Aang is kind and, on principle, against violence, his careless attitude and lack of foresight make him a very dangerous young man. To everyone."

Iroh locked eyes with the people sitting around the fire before continuing. It was very important that _everyone_ in the room was paying close attention to what he was telling them now. For their own safety, they needed to stop underestimating Aang.

In the words of an old Fire Nation saying: 'When you play with fire, it is the people around you who get burnt.'

"Although most of the people from the other nations have sided with the Avatar, considering his return a blessing, they are mistaken if they for one second think the Avatar is dangerous only to the Fire Nation."

"Most people are happy to hear the Avatar has returned in large part because when they hear the word 'Avatar' they think about _the past Avatars_. But I feel it is important to point out that although Aang is an Avatar, he is very far from a _fully realized Avatar_."

"The Avatar training consists of much more than just learning all four _bendings_."

Uncle kept a short break to emphasize how important this point was. It was something the Avatar needed to know but probably didn't, and hopefully the Water Tribe siblings would pass the message along.

"The Avatars of the past spent _four years_ in each nation, learning not only bending but also about the traditions, beliefs and worldviews of each nation. Only a fully realized Avatar who understands and can sympathize all the people of the world, not just those who share a similar background and upbringing to his, can sustain peace and balance in the world."

"The whole point of the Avatar institution is to give the world a judge who understands and appreciates cultural differences between people. So long as an Avatar is clueless and insensitive towards these differences, as I believe Aang is, his judgments will be unjust and they will not help make the world a better place."

"According to Aang's own words, he wants nothing more than to bring peace and balance to the world, and I believe that the young man indeed has no conscious wish to harm anyone. However, Aang's past actions clearly indicate that, although he knows next to nothing of the current war, he is not only willing but eager to take part in the fighting, and he has already picked a side. He has been quite hostile towards almost all Fire Nation people he's met."

"It is dangerous for an Avatar to adopt such an active role in world politics at such an early stage in his Avatar training. Complimentary to his title of the Avatar, people will follow his lead. But as Aang is not yet qualified to make decisions for the world, I fear he will lead his followers hastily and end up being more of a threat than an asset even to those who he means well."

"Also, in my opinion, even more dangerous than Aang's conscious war efforts against the Fire Nation are the things he's done by accident. The Avatar is very powerful, and Aang is using that power very carelessly."

"For example, there was a time when Zuko took a very serious look at his task of capturing the Avatar, weighing whether it was as important as our nation has traditionally considered it to be. The new Avatar is, after all, no Avatar Roku."

In a less familiar company Iroh wouldn't have dared tell military men that their commanding officer was questioning his orders, but in this company he saw no harm in it. Soldiers weren't supposed think for themselves, certainly not weigh personally whether to do the tasks they were given, but this crew didn't consist of the most upright Fire Nation sailors of all time.

Everyone on the crew had, one way or another, screwed up or fallen out of grace before been put on this assignment. If they hadn't questioned the meaningfulness of their orders before, they had learned to question it during the last three years on the sea.

This crew wouldn't just be understanding towards his nephew's doubts. They would probably be relieved to hear that Zuko wasn't acting on blind faith but occasionally stopped to consider what was worth fighting for. For everyone's sake.

"Zuko even considered if there was some other, better way of insuring that the Avatar wouldn't hurt our nation than just hunting the Air Nomad down."

This was true. The words had never been said out loud, but Iroh knew his nephew well enough that he usually knew what was going on in the teenager's head.

Zuko wouldn't have put capturing the Avatar a second priority to finding his mother if he hadn't at least suspected the Avatar wasn't as evil as he'd been taught to believe.

"After all, the young Avatar has not been excessively violent towards our nation. Not that our nation is in a position to claim monopoly on use of violence as a means of reaching ones goals, one way or the other."

Iroh was happy to see that many of the soldier's nodded in understanding. They were siding with Zuko on this.

"However, any chances of Zuko trying to come up with a peaceful solution were, quite literally, washed away when he learned of what the Avatar had done at a small Fire Nation colony."

"In there, the Avatar was manipulated into participating in a plan to blow up a dam to cause a flood that would've killed everyone in the town. Due to a freakish stroke of luck, although the dam was destroyed, no one was seriously injured. If there had been loss of life, though, I'm sure Zuko would've never forgiven himself."

"Since then, capturing the Avatar has once again been Prince Zuko's first priority. Even though Aang means well, his carefree attitude does make him a great danger to our nation and the world."

"Aang hasn't caused a massive catastrophe resulting in significant loss of life yet, but so long as he doesn't stop to consider the consequences of his actions before hand and bases those actions on hundred-year-old presumptions and advice from his equally inexperienced companions, I fear it is only a matter of time."

The last part was directed at the Water Tribe kids eavesdropping on the conversation. Iroh could only pray that they were ready to hear this and would at least consider doing things differently from now

on.

Katara and Sokka did, after all, have more influence on the Avatar than perhaps anyone else in the world.

Truth be told, Iroh was being rather harsh on the Avatar, perhaps more harsh than was necessary. Personally, Uncle was much more worried about all the things his nation was doing to the world even as they spoke than anything the Avatar had been up to of late.

After all, how likely was it that any one person, even the Avatar, would constantly get into situations where he could accidentally be part of doing something awful that couldn't have been done without his participation.

The Avatar at least meant well, which was already more than Iroh could say for his brother.

So long as the Avatar had no ill will against anyone, the world was relatively safe from him. More safe than it had been during the reigns of some past Avatars, at least.

Despite their over decade of training, some Avatars had never learned to truly appreciate the other elements and had always favored their birth element.

Aang may have been ignorant, but ignorance was a flaw more easily fixed than an attitude problem.

Still, harsh or not, every word Iroh had said was true and, as he had a tendency of saying: 'What's right is never needless to say out loud'.

ooo

Zuko was worried. All this standing around doing nothing was bad for him.

Even when injured, ill or tired, Zuko could keep going so long as he had a clear target and goals. Now he was standing outside the fortuneteller's house, waiting for Aang to come back and tell him the news, and all the uncertainty and wondering around was starting to get to him.

Zuko had to blink several times to keep his vision clear and his senses keen. If something didn't happen soon, he might have to lie down, though.

"...And there's the dragon that I told you about. The one that brought me all this way to show me that the volcano is active", Aang emerged from the house, dragging with him an elderly, well-dressed woman.

The fortuneteller, Zuko guessed, The one person in this town we really have to convince of the danger to get people to believe us.

"Well?" Aang sounded frustrated. Although it was nice to see the Air Nomad for once taking things seriously, his frustration was probably a bad sign.

"Now do you believe me?"

The gray-haired woman looked at the sky and said: "I understand your concern but, as you can see, there are no omens of death in the clouds. Also, although seen a black dragon is generally considered a bad omen, seeing a dragon near a volcano is always a good omen, so they balance each other out. We should be quite safe."

Zuko's eyes narrowed.

He could feel irritation growing within him. That was good. Anger could cloud your judgment, but it also gave you strength to keep going, and that was what Zuko needed right now.

There was only one person in this village they needed to convince in order to save them all, but she wouldn't be swayed by words. She only believed in what she saw herself, with her own two eyes.

Well, that can be arranged.

ooo

The dragon's eyes narrowed ominously.

In a flash, the animal rushed forward, grabbed Aunt Wu in its front paw and rose to air, all this in one fluid motion.

All Aang had time to do was gape.

"Avatar Aang, your dragon just kidnapped Aunt Wu!" the fortuneteller's adorable little assistant shouted, sounding more amazed than anything.

Aang smiled apologetically and rubbed the back of his neck: "Uh, well, it's not actually _my_ dragon..."

ooo

Sokka tapped Katara on the shoulder to get her attention.

She startled a bit and turned to look at her brother, still looking as dazed and puzzled as Sokka felt like.

Most of the things they had just learned from Iroh were news to Sokka.

Most of it was probably lies and Fire Nation propaganda, but if even ten per cent of what they had just heard was true...

Sokka would have to spent more time analyzing Iroh's claims about Aang, the past Avatars and Prince Zuko to make sense of them, but right now time was something he and Katara didn't have.

They still needed to break out of the Fire Nation ship, the faster the better.

Sokka signaled to Katara that they had to keep moving. She looked one more time down at the camp fire and the soldiers gathered around it before turning back to Sokka and nodding.

Sokka and Katara were practically at the door by now. Sokka crawled the rest of the way to it and took a deep breath to calm himself.

Slowly and carefully as not to make any sounds, Sokka tried to open the door.

Thankfully, the door wasn't locked. Nor did it squeak. Nor was there anyone in the corridor behind it.

Sokka sighed in relief. Looked like Lady Luck was on their side today.

Finally they were safely out of the two-story storage room.

Sokka turned to talk to Katara, but his sister beat him to it. Looking worried, Katara asked: "He was lying, right?"

"Probably", Sokka allowed, "We'll have to think about it later. Right now we still need to find a way out of this ship. Without causing an alarm if possible."

Katara nodded, her confusion changing back to determination: "I have Momo, but do you think Appa or Aang are still somewhere here?"

A good question. It wouldn't be right if they accidentally left any team members behind.

Sokka shook his head: "I seriously doubt it. Appa is too big for it to be convenient for them to drag him with them. And Aang can't be here, because if he were, this ship wouldn't just be standing around doing nothing. It would be en route to Fire Nation by now."

"Plus they said Zuko isn't here", Sokka added in a lighter tone, "So where else could he possibly be than out trying to capture the Avatar."

Sokka had meant to lighten the mood, but his comment had the opposite effect. Katara looked very serious.

"Anyways, we gotta keep going", Sokka urged.

Katara nodded: "Which way should we go?"

Sokka lifted his hand on his chin, looking thoughtful: "Well, I don't know much about Fire Nation ships, but we have been to this particular ship once before..."

"Only on the deck. So, are you trying to say that you have no idea?" Katara guessed.

"No", Sokka defended, "We can still try to use logic to get us out of here. Taking into account the ship's size and mass..."

Katara turned from Sokka and started walking.

They had barely rounded the first corner when Katara suddenly grabbed Sokka by the sleeve and pointed ahead of them.

There was something on the corridor. It wasn't big enough to be a person, but that didn't mean it couldn't be something alive. Who knew what kind of awful things lurked in these ships?

Suddenly Momo wiggled out of Katara's embrace and run straight for the pile of something on the corridor.

The lemur dug around and suddenly lifted a piece of fruit from the pile.

"Sokka", Katara whispered, sounding happy, "It's not an enemy. It's our stuff."

Sokka looked again. His sister was right.

Their weapons and bags and overcoats were neatly folded on the corridor.

Also, atop of the pile there was a small stack of dried fruits, which Momo was quickly stuffing into his mouth.

Weird. We didn't have any dried fruits on us_, Sokka briefly wondered, but dismissed the thought. It was probably nothing important.

Both children quickly gathered their stuff. While Sokka was still going over their findings, making sure none of his belongings were missing, Katara suddenly exclaimed: "Look!"

Sokka turned to look, expecting an assault, but there was no one behind him.

"It's Aang's airstaff!"

Sokka blinked. Twice.

Again, his sister was right.

A few meters from them there was an open door and inside the room was Aang's wooden stick.

Sokka sighed: "Sis, you only say 'look' like that if there is a Fire Nation guy about to attack us."

Katara walked into the room and grabbed the staff, saying: "If there was a Fire Nation guy attacking, you'd know, because I would be in a waterbending kata."

Sokka rolled his eyes, but then thought to ask: "You have water on you?"

Katara opened her water skin's cork, and then shook her head: "No."

"Well, I've got my boomerang. That should be enough so long as we don't let anyone give out an alarm."

The siblings started moving again.

They passed a few more empty corridors and whenever they ran into a

staircase leading up, they took it. Sokka presumed they were inside the ship's hull, so up was the way to go.

Finally Sokka could see something ahead of them.

Natural light. That had to be a way to the deck.

Silently the Water Tribe youngsters made their way to the door and peeked to see if there were any guards on the sunlit deck.

There were none.

"Huh", Sokka said.

Katara lifted her eyebrows at her brother.

"Doesn't this seem a bit too... easy to you ?" Sokka had to ask.

Everyone knew Fire Nation soldiers were easy to trick. Well, that was at least how they were portrayed in all the Water Tribe stories told at camp fires.

Still, Sokka couldn't shake off the feeling that he was missing something.

"No, Sokka, I don't. Let's just go", Katara hurried her brother, "And even if there is something going on, it won't be our problem for much longer."

"What gives?" it was Sokka's turn to ask.

Katara lifted a small wooden object in her hand. It was the bison whistle.

"You can't be serious", Sokka said, "That thing doesn't even work. And even if it did, we have no guarantee that Appa would be within hearing range."

Ignoring her brother, Katara blew the whistle, which made no sound at all.

Sokka couldn't quite believe that their escape plan was depending on the off chance that a broken decorative item would get them to safety.

He looked around the deck one more time, attempting to decide whether it was safe to step on it.

There appeared to be an open ramp leading down to the near-by docks, but once again Sokka had a nagging feeling that it just couldn't be that easy.

"Look!" Katara, clearly having ignored her brother's earlier wishes regarding the use of that particular word, shouted.

Sokka couldn't believe his eyes.

Appa was flying straight for them.

The gigantic bison landed atop the ship's deck much like it had done the previous time they had been aboard Zuko's ship.

By now a few Fire Nation soldiers had noticed that something was going on. Sokka could see two soldiers running out of an upper observing deck.

Quickly, Sokka and Katara ran over to Appa and climbed atop the bison as fast as they could.

Before any of the soldiers had time to stop them, Appa was up and away.

"Appa! We are so happy to see you!" Katara hugged the bison's head.

"Yep, that was amazing", Sokka congratulated the animal.

Sokka looked behind them. They were heading inland so the ship wouldn't be able to follow.

The port was quickly becoming just a dot in the horizon.

Katara was going through their stuff to make sure they hadn't dropped anything in their hurry. She was now holding Aang's airstaff in her hands.

"Funny, though", Katara whispered, "The staff, I mean. Aang was so sure it had been destroyed."

"Well, maybe Aang didn't know it for sure but just jumped to conclusions, presuming the worst", Sokka commented, only after having let the words out his mouth realizing how absurd they were.

"Aang? Presuming_ the worst_?" Katara asked sceptically, "That'll be the day."

Sokka tried to think of a witty response, but then he saw the worried look on her sister's face and went instead with: "Aang is fine, you know."

"No, we don't know that", Katara answered monotonically.

"I have a feeling he is", Sokka comforted, "And soon we will know it for a fact because, considering the awesome luck we seem to be having today, we are sure to run into him soon."

Katara smiled weakly at him: "I hope you are right."

ooo

"Oh, um. Hear me, my friends. It turns out that there are some omens indicating that Mt. Makapu might be about to erupt after all", Aunt Wu, still looking a bit dazed from her journey, her hair pointing at wild directions, told the town folk gathered on the main square.

Many of the citizens gasped and sighed in surprise and worry.

Zuko and Aang exchanged _a look_.

"Fine", Aang admitted, crossing his arms, "Taking Aunt Wu to see the crater _was_ a good idea, but next time you could be a bit more polite about it. Or at least give _me_ the heads-up before acting. Kidnapping people won't always solve your problems."

Zuko snickered. He couldn't help it. The irony of the Avatar giving him a lecture on good manners and not kidnapping people wasn't lost on him.

"What should we do to prevent the catastrophe?" one of the villagers asked Aunt Wu.

While the fortuneteller was struggling to find the right words, Aang jumped next to her and spoke: "Hi. Some of you already know this, but I'm the Avatar. Avatar Aang. And I'm here to help you."

Now everyone's eyes were on Aang: "We have to evacuate immediately."

"But what about our homes? Now that we have been foretold of this disaster, there must be some way for us to save the village!" someone from the crowd shouted.

Aang looked uneasy: "Yeah, well, if somebody has an_ idea_ on how to do that, I'm open to suggestions..."

Zuko was no longer listening to the Avatar. It was very hard for him to focus on anything other than the chilling feeling that someone just walked over his memorial shrine.

He wiggled his body restlessly a few times and then turned to look at the volcano.

It was going to happen right now.

ooo

Suddenly there was a sound of rumble, and the earth beneath Aang shook a bit.

Aang looked around himself even though he could already guess what had caused the earthquake.

A thick cloud of black smoke rose from Mt. Makapu.

The volcano was erupting.

There won't be time to evacuate the village now, Aang realized, _Not unless I do something to slow the lava currents down._

Even though it was bigger and more menacing than anything Aang had fought in the past, Aang had to try to fight the volcano. If he could buy the villagers even a few more minutes of time to get to safety, he would.

"Everyone, stay calm!" Aang shouted over the panicking crowd. "Everything is going to be okay."

Aang couldn't really see how everything was going to be okay, but he

had to say something. Panic wasn't going to get them anywhere.

Suddenly the dragon was next to Aang, extending its whisker to him the same way Roku's dragon had.

The whisker touched Aang's forehead.

First he thought nothing was going to happen. Then Aang suddenly saw brief glimpses of different scenes, different memories, but the vision was too erratic for Aang to be able to get any coherent information out of it.

The dragon snarled under its breath, but before Aang had time to ask what was wrong, the vision cleared.

First Aang saw an image of a little girl dressed in green. Then the vision shifted a bit, and Aang suddenly recognized the place the dragon was showing him. It was the field outside Jet's forest.

In the vision, the earth suddenly shot up, creating a massive trench that guided the flood wave past the village.

The connection broke and Aang was back in the fortuneteller's village.

He turned to look at the dragon, who was still looking directly at him.

Aang nodded to the dragon. He understood what it wanted him to do.

"But I don't know any earthbending", Aang confessed.

The dragon lifted its gaze and let it sweep the villagers.

"Right", Aang realized, and then turned to address the village: "Could everyone here who is an earthbender lift his hand?"

A considerable amount of hands rose.

"Good. Here is what we are going to do..."

ooo

"Wait, what's that?" Sokka asked.

Katara turned to look. She had heard the rumble, too.

A mountain top not very far from them had just burst a massive dark cloud of smoke to the sky.

"A volcano", Katara recognized. Even though she had never seen one herself, she had heard many descriptions and seen drawings of such things.

The smoke was spreading quickly to the sky. It looked almost beautiful and, at the same time, very dangerous.

"What if there are people down there?" Katara stated her fears out

loud.

"We have gotta go there", Sokka said and pulled Appa's reigns. "Cause if there are, a flying bison could be their only way to safety."

Sokka sounded very serious, all of his usual humor gone.

Katara nodded. They had to go see if there was anything they could do to help. Finding Aang would have to wait.

Appa flew bravely closer to the erupting volcano. He swooped down in order to fly under the thick cloud of smoke that the wind was carrying towards north.

Sokka's focus was on guiding the airbison so Katara concentrated on looking around to see if there were any people down below.

"Look! A village", Katara noticed.

She felt a slump forming in her throat.

There was a village right at the foot of the volcano. The village was full of people. Too many for them all to fit on Appa's saddle.

"Wow, look!" Sokka commented back, "Look what they are doing!"

Katara looked again, just in time to see how a group of earthbenders lifted an earth wall roughly the height of a building.

In fact everywhere around the village there were people either earthbending or shoveling the earth, creating trenches and walls around the village.

"They are going to guide the lava away", Sokka said out loud the same thing Katara had just realized.

"Let's go see if we can help", Katara said.

Sokka nodded and began guiding Appa down.

Suddenly Katara saw something flashing past her peripheral vision.

She turned to look, and could barely believe her eyes.

"Aang!" Katara shouted, calling out to the figure wearing orange.

Sokka, too, turned to look.

Aang was some distance up the volcano's side. The airbender had his back turned towards the village, and hadn't heard Katara's cry.

Instead Aang jumped in the air and did an airbending kata, forming a massive gust of wind to cool and redirect the currents of lava that were headed for the village.

The struggle between an Avatar and a force of nature was terrifying to look at, mainly because the fight was so unbalanced. There was no way Aang could win.

Katara was both relieved and worried to see his friend.

"We have to go help him!" she turned to face Sokka.

Suddenly, something else flashed past Aang.

A dragon the exact same color as the dark wall of smoke flew dangerously close to the lava and breathed a wave of fire on the rocks. The lava followed the path the dragon's fire had carved for it.

The dragon swooped in the air, turning 180 degrees in a flash of black scales. It flew next to Aang and flapped its wings to create more cooling wind.

Despite Aang's best efforts, the lava in front of him was steadily approaching the Air Nomad, already dangerously close.

On the last minute Aang did an airbending jump and somersaulted on to the dragon's back.

Together the two, the Avatar and the black dragon, kept fighting against impossible odds.

"Sokka, we have to go to Aang! Now!" Katara hurried.

"No", Sokka said, "There is nothing you or I can do against a volcano. We'll be of more good at the village, helping them dig."

"No!" Katara shouted. A part of her understood Sokka's reasoning, but a more dominant part couldn't accept leaving Aang to fend for himself.

"Aang needs us!" Katara pleaded.

She couldn't take her eyes off the battle raging on on the volcano's slope.

The dragon shot a quick fire bolt directly into a stream of lava, causing the lava to explode a bit.

Before the consequent column of molten rock had time to fall down, Aang cooled it with airbending.

Aang and the dragon's seamless teamwork had just created a natural wall that divided the lava and redirected it slightly left so that it would go past the village and into the trenches the earthbenders had dug.

__He is doing fine__, Katara numbly realized. __He's the Avatar. He knows what he is doing. And he isn't alone.__

And still, Katara couldn't stop worrying for him.

Sokka, ignoring his sister's wishes, landed the bison at the

outskirts of the village, a safe distance from the lava but also close enough to the trenches for it to be easy for them to get to the earthbenders.

Appa complained. Sokka jumped down to pat the bison's neck soothingly.

Down on the ground the air felt even hotter than it had up in the air. The land, too, felt noticeably warm under Katara's soft leather boots.

A woman in her thirties ran over to them: "Who are you?"

"I'm Sokka", Sokka almost shouted in order to be heard over the chaos, "This is my sister Katara. We are friends of the Avatar and have come to offer our help. Is there anything we can do?"

"Are you earthbenders?" the woman asked.

"No, we are Water Tribe. My sister is a waterbender", Sokka answered.

The woman nodded: "There's nothing much left to do. The lava has all but passed the village with help from your airbender friend and his dragon."

As if summoned by the mentioning of his name, Aang was suddenly there, sitting on a dragon hovering above them: "Katara! Sokka!"

The Air Nomad jumped from the dragon's back and landed gracefully between the Water Tribe siblings. He hugged them both, saying: "I was so worried for you!"

"You", Katara managed, "Worried for us?"

The waterbender pulled Aang a bit closer as Sokka let go of them.

"My sis has a point. We weren't the ones riding dragons and fighting volcanoes", Sokka pointed out.

Appa was next to them, too. He licked Aang with his enormous tongue, causing the boy to giggle: "Appa!"

Despite Aang hugging him, the airbison started soon to growl. The reason for this wasn't hard to guess: the dragon had landed.

"It's okay", Aang told his animal guide, "He's a friendly dragon. He rescued me from the Fire Nation and brought me here to save this village."

"The Fire Nation?" Katara was shocked, "Exactly how many dangers have you encountered while you were supposedly looking for medicine?"

"Let me guess", Sokka put in, "Prince Zuko tried to capture you?"

"Well, he was there too, but it was the archers that that Zhao guy

sent after me that I needed _saving_ from. Thankfully, a masked man called the Blue Spirit and a dragon came to my rescue."

"Wow", Sokka exclaimed, "That makes us getting kidnapped by General Iroh sound pretty dull."

Katara wasn't quite as quick to share on the boys' excitement: "Aang, you could've really gotten hurt."

"I know", Aang said, "But it's not like I planned this. Plus, I wasn't in that much danger. The Fire Nation wants me caught alive. I did try to get back to you as soon as I could. I really did."

Katara smiled at him, but before she had time to say anything more, the dragon standing some distance from them suddenly fell to the ground.

ooo

Zuko was no quitter, but right now he saw no pressing reason to keep fighting his nausea. So instead he allowed himself to fall to the ground.

The village was safe.

Zuko was surrounded by enemies, but he wasn't in any life threatening danger from them, no matter what.

Most importantly, though, he didn't have to keep fighting to stay alert to capture the Avatar, because he wouldn't.

_Wow, this totally completes my betrayal, _Zuko thought solemnly.

A thought had been nagging him ever since he'd seen the way the Air Nomad had approached the danger threatening the village. Without a moment's hesitation or a second guess the boy had been willing to risk his life to keep this ungrateful lot alive.

Zuko had read everything he could get his hands on about every Avatar known to history in preparation for his task, so he knew exactly how dangerous Aang could be. Still, the kid wasn't _just_ dangerous.

Most stories depicted the Avatar as someone very powerful and important, but often also as someone who did great things.

So far Zuko had only been looking at the catastrophes and disasters Aang had caused or might cause in the future. The worst case scenarios. Only now he could truly see all the _good_ having an Avatar around might do to the world.

These people would've probably died if Aang hadn't been here. If I had succeeded in capturing Aang on my first try, a lot of people might have died as a result because the Avatar wouldn't have been there to save them.

So the Avatar was capable of both, great good and bad. Zuko's decision boiled down to which way the scales were likely to tip.

This isn't just about the Fire Nation. It's about the whole world.

During the storm Uncle had told Zuko that he needed to consider his actions and the consequences they might hold on a larger scale than before. Think about the bigger picture.

And the more Zuko did, the less sure he was of his plan to capture Aang.

Capturing the Avatar was the only way to _ensure_ that he wouldn't do something awful. However, it would also ensure that he couldn't do _anything_.

Nothing good. The Avatar couldn't be there to prevent natural disasters and other things no one else had the power or the interest to prevent.

Granted, Aang had done some pretty bad stuff. A certain dam came to mind. But even then he hadn't _intended_ for it to happen.

_Good intentions. _

That had meant next to nothing to Zuko in the past, but suddenly the words held power.

The Avatar could as well destroy or save a lot of lives. From that point of view, intentions suddenly mattered.

Zuko knew that just because Aang _meant_ well didn't guarantee he wouldn't end up doing something awful. And still...

_The Avatar has been gone over a hundred years and, in his absence, the world has gone to hell. Doesn't look like we have much to _loose_ by giving an Avatar a try._

Zuko could've tried to communicate with the Avatar. Tell him that if the boy behaved and did only good things from now on, he'd no longer have to worry about Prince Zuko getting in his way. But the words sounded silly and naive even in Zuko's mind.

No one knows the future. We can only hope for the best.

Optimism wasn't exactly Zuko's strongest suit, but you had to try everything once.

Also, the one connection Zuko had been able to establish with Aang had taken a lot of focus and effort, so Zuko doubted he even could communicate anything to the monk in his current state.

Zuko guessed his Power of Dragons was off because he was too weak and thus lacked the focus required. The fact that this was the Avatar he would have to open up to probably played a part as well.

Aang was damn near the last person on the world Zuko wanted to accidentally reveal something about himself. Or, even worse, he might accidentally learn more about the Avatar and start once and for all seeing him as a human being, as a kind, twelve-year-old kid. How was he supposed to imprison _that_ without moral scruples?

Now it didn't matter, though.

Even if Zuko had wanted to capture the Avatar right then and there, he wouldn't probably have been able to pull it off. Not when he'd have to fight the bison as well.

In essence, what Zuko chose now didn't matter. He could decide what he wanted to do with the Avatar later.

Then again, postponing the inevitable wasn't like of the Prince. He was more a face-your-problems-head-on kind of guy.

In other words, he had made his choice, and it was not to capture the Avatar.

"Buddy, are you okay?" The Avatar came closer, sounding worried, "He might be injured. He was a bit like this earlier today, but I thought he got better."

The latter statements were meant for his friends. From the corner of his eye, Zuko could see the Water Tribe girl nodding and then walking towards him with a determinant look on her face.

She was holding something in her hands. A globe of water.

Zuko didn't get up but he turned half towards the girl and started to growl. That stopped the girl dead in her tracks.

"No", Aang said and stepped forward, "It's okay. Katara is my friend and she's going help you. She's a waterbender. She can heal."

It took a long while before the words sank in.

Waterbender. And that's supposed to be a good thing.

The Avatar had a point, but Zuko was still dubious to say the least.

After giving the option some thought, Zuko made his decision.

She wouldn't offer to help if she knew who I really am.

That did it for Zuko. It reminded him that he wasn't among friends. These people wouldn't be so kind and helpful if they knew he was Prince Zuko.

Zuko heaved himself up, startling all three children to take a step back.

He drew strength from his inner fire, preparing to take a flight.

Zuko had a destination again. Following the Avatar's bison's distinctive smell would lead him there.

To Uncle.

Zuko rose to the air. His flight wasn't exactly steady, but the main point was that he was on the way again.

On his way home.

ooo

"I don't get it", Aang said while the children watched the dragon fly away, "He was really gentle and nice earlier."

Sokka put his hand on Aang's shoulder: "This isn't your fault, Aang. I'm sure you were as nice as anyone can be. My guess is that your friend is a wild dragon, and not as easily tamed as Momo was."

"Maybe", the airbender allowed, "I just hope he's going to be okay."

"I'm sure he will be", Katara said, "He was well enough to growl and fly, so I'm sure he's well enough to fend for himself."

Aang still looked really down. Sokka tried to think of something to say to cheer him up.

Sokka looked at Appa and a very simple idea came to him. He walked over to the bison, climbed into the saddle and lifted something in his hand: "Besides, look what we found!"

"My air staff!" Aang exclaimed and took the staff Sokka handed to him, "But... how is this possible? I thought Prince Zuko destroyed it."

"Well, turns out he didn't", Sokka replied, smiling.

"Great! Uh, do you know why?" Aang asked.

"I don't know and since it turns out Prince Zuko is a much more complicated person than we ever gave him credit for, I'm not going to even try to guess", Sokka answered quizzically.

Aang looked surprised by Sokka's comment. He turned to Katara for an explanation.

"A long story", the Water Tribe girl sighed, "We'll tell you all about it later."

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After the escape of the Water Tribe siblings (which had been even more eventful than even Iroh had planned as the Avatar's bison had made a guest appearance) Iroh had spent his time convincing his crew that he was almost certain Prince Zuko wouldn't be mad at them for letting the prisoners get away.

Then Iroh had made sure that their ship was fully stocked. Then he had had a good meal.

Iroh had even spent some time amusing himself by speculating how on earth the airbison had managed to track them down like that. Perhaps it had followed Iroh, Sokka and Katara's scent to the shore, been clever enough to deduce that they were most likely traveling by ship and had then searched the coastline.

Iroh would probably never know the truth. Still, he had to give it to the bison that it had had an impeccable timing.

After having done all this Iroh had run out of things to keep his mind occupied with, leaving him with nothing but his constant worry over Zuko.

After several crew members had come to Iroh to ask if there was anything they could do to help, Iroh had decided that he wasn't going to sit around waiting for Zuko to come back.

It wasn't a very rational decision. Iroh had no idea where Zuko was, and even though he had almost half the crew helping him search the small port and the near-by forest, it wasn't all too likely that they were going to run into Zuko.

Something must have gone wrong.

They weren't that far from the stronghold. Zuko should have been to the rendezvous point by now.

A part of Iroh wanted to sail back to Pohuai Stronghold right away, not caring how suspicious it would look.

If Zuko had failed in freeing the Avatar, he could have gotten captured. Or worse, but Iroh couldn't allow himself to think like that.

Iroh was more than ready to take on the entire stronghold if need be, but he knew it wasn't that simple.

If Zuko had gotten out of the place in one piece and run into complications only after that, he could still very well be on his way there.

Zuko was only a few hours late. Even though Uncle was extremely worried, he couldn't jump the gun on this.

He would have to give Zuko more time to. He needed to have faith in his nephew.

So, for the time being, all Uncle could do was search the near-by forest. Which was what he was doing.

Lieutenant Jee was in charge of the ship in Iroh and Zuko's absence.

Iroh and two other crew members were sitting next to a cliff. They had just trekked through the forest, following the coastline south, looking for any signs that his nephew had been there.

They had stopped to rest at a spot where the coast rose high from the ocean, creating a good place for scanning the area.

Iroh knew they had trekked quite far and that the reasonable thing to do next would be to head back to the ship.

I need to find Zuko, but this isn't the way.

"Look!" Seaman Li suddenly said and pointed at the sky. "What's

that?"

Iroh turned to look, and was relieved beyond words to recognize a familiar silhouette slithering in the air.

Zuko was heading a bit north from their position. Probably towards the ship.

But a Fire-Nation-friendly port was no place for a dragon, so Iroh decided he should try to call Zuko's attention to himself.

Uncle took a firebending stance and did a large firefist directly above himself. The column of fire rose high into the sky.

Uncle was pleased to notice Zuko changed direction to head towards the column of fire.

"Sir, I think it's coming here", Seaman Juva warned.

Indeed, Iroh should have a word with the crew members present about what they would soon encounter.

"Yes, I believe it is. But that is perfectly alright. I have everything under control."

Seamen Li and Juva didn't look convinced, but they nodded.

Iroh felt it was necessary to give them a bit more information: "I have experience in dealing with dragons. Leave this to me."

As Iroh saw Zuko approach them, he knew something was wrong.

Although the dragon moved at an impressive speed, his moves were erratic.

He was flying so low he was brushing tree tops, even occasionally hitting a branch or two, and still Zuko didn't take up more altitude or even slow down his speed.

Yes, there was definitely something wrong with his nephew.

Now Zuko was upon them. He half landed half fell into the clearing. The ungraceful entrance caused Li and Juva to take a few steps back.

Iroh, on the contrary, hurried over to his nephew.

Zuko was on his feet, although only barely, and Iroh noticed he wasn't putting much weight on his left front paw.

Zuko snarled a bit, which caught Iroh by surprise.

"What is wrong?" Iroh asked the dragon, "What is it you need me to do?"

Iroh wasn't sure how much he could do to help so long as Zuko was a dragon. The problem was that Uncle wasn't certain what it was that set Zuko's transformation in motion. He had a few working theories, but on a moment such as this, they felt feeble at best.

Iroh knew Zuko was in pain and needed him, but he didn't know how to help.

Zuko's body swayed a bit, and the dragon shook its head as if trying to clear it.

Seaman Li took a step forward, asking Iroh: "Sir, are you alright...?"

The movement caused Zuko to hiss at the man, revealing his teeth.

"Nephew!" Iroh shouted, "Where are your manners?"

Zuko froze in place.

Uncle hated shouting at Zuko, but he needed him to snap out of it, and confusing the boy seemed like the fastest way.

"Your hardworking crew is here to help. They deserve to be treated better than this", Iroh stated with a stern voice.

For a moment Iroh could see in Zuko's eyes just how utterly lost the boy felt.

Iroh immediately felt remorse for his hard words, but before he had time to say anything else, a bright multicolored flame lit the clearing around the cliff.

Zuko lost his balance and started to fall, but Iroh had been expecting this. He caught the boy into an embrace before Zuko had time to fall to the ground.

Iroh eased Zuko down, not for a moment lessening his hold on the teenager.

Iroh was down on his knees, holding Zuko's head on his lap.

The boy had high fever, Iroh could tell. He was also covered in soot, which wasn't usual despite his flashy transformation.

Zuko was barely conscious, but he managed: "Uncle... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... scare you..."

"Shh, it's alright", Iroh hurried to comfort his nephew, "I'm not angry with you. You did well, and now you need to rest."

"I let the Avatar go", Zuko's words were hardly louder than a whisper.

"It's alright", Iroh repeated.

Some of the tenseness and worry on Zuko's face lessened, and he fell to restless sleep.

As Iroh held his nephew in his arms, the boy looked so young, so small, so fragile.

"Sir?" Seaman Juva asked.

Iroh sighed. _The gini is out of the bottle now._

"Sir", Seaman Juva repeated with more confidence and determination, "What are your orders? What can we do to help?"

"We should get Zuko back to the ship", Iroh said, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears.

"Yes, sir", Seaman Li answered.

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****A/N****

This is my third update in a week. So many major things are finally happening that I couldn't resist updating quickly.

And yes, there are a more grammar errors and misspellings in this chapter than usually. I apologize for this. Please try to look past them. It's a long chapter, I wrote it quickly and I'm a non-native speaker.

And to all of you who told me you're reading this fic although you should actually be doing school work: I know how you feel, I've been _writing_ this fic when I should've been doing school work ;)

A scene where Iroh sits down with Aang and really let's him hear it never happened in the series. Totally should have, but never did.

In case you were wondering (not that anyone was) seeing a dragon near a volcano is a good omen because dragons can sense when a volcano is about to erupt and normally leave before that happens. Plenty of superstitious beliefs in real life are originally based on observations and rational thinking, so why not in the Avatar world as well.

And lastly, sorry for the cliffhanger, but you'll just have to wait for the next chapter to hear more. Review while you wait, I'll appreciate.

24. Wish You Felt Better

****24. Wish You Felt Better****

Lieutenant Jee knocked on a door. There was no answer.

"Sir", he called through the metal door, "It's Lieutenant Jee. May I enter?"

Jee and Iroh went back a long time. They had met for the first time seven years ago when Iroh had still been one of the leading generals of the Fire Nation. Although they had only talked briefly, the Lieutenant had immediately been impressed by the General's strategic wit and understanding of both, his own troops and the enemy troops alike.

Although Iroh's decision to end his 600 day siege on Ba Sing Se had made him rather unpopular among most circles, Jee had never thought

the man worse for it. On the contrary, even.

There's no dishonor in facing the facts and admitting your enemy is better than you. Especially not when the alternative is to keep fighting until all your men are gone.

Jee hadn't known Iroh very well before been put on this assignment, but his respect towards the old General had only increased, if anything, as the Lieutenant had spent three years watching how the man patiently guided a difficult teenager through endless rocky patches.

Though, now that Jee knew more of Zuko's past, he understood Iroh's attitude towards the Prince much better. He wasn't a spoiled Royal prat like Jee had sometimes thought when Zuko had really gotten on his nerves.

_The Prince has had a really hard life. He's been through stuff that most grown men couldn't have handled. After Zuko's own family abandoned him in such a traumatizing way, the kid needed _someone_ to look after him._

So, although this loving and peaceful old man hadn't exactly matched Jee's previous idea of General Iroh, he and the entire crew had nothing but respect toward the old man. Also, Jee knew that the Dragon of the West was nowhere near as harmless as he lead people on.

The Dragon of the...

Jee gulped. He really _hoped_ that it was just a nickname.

"Come in", Iroh's voice finally answered from Prince Zuko's room. His tone wasn't cold or uninviting, but the mere shortness of his statement told Jee that the old General wasn't in his usual chatty mood. Not that Jee was surprised by this.

The Lieutenant himself had been worried and upset upon learning that Prince Zuko was back but that he wasn't well.

Jee had immediately asked if Iroh wanted them to find a healer for the boy, but Iroh's only answer had been a quizzical: "Thank you for the suggestion but it wont' be necessary. This isn't a natural illness."

After that Iroh had ordered Jee to call all the crew back from their search. This hadn't taken very long, because the news of Zuko's return had spread fast. All the crew was now back and ready for further orders. Except that there hadn't been any.

The old General hadn't left his nephew's side since coming back.

The crew weren't expected to look for a healer or find a healing facility. They weren't going after the Avatar while Zuko was ill. In short, they had no orders or obvious destinations.

Which had left a lot of time for gossiping.

Jee wasn't sure what to make of this story about Prince Zuko being a dragon. It sounded impossible. People didn't just turn into dragons

or vice versa. And still...

When the water spirit had attacked the ship during the storm it had mentioned something remarkably similar. The spirit's words had been least of their problems at the time, but despite the howling wind, everyone on deck had heard that particular part.

"_Please don't tell me you actually thought you could just casually turn into a dragon and still fly under everyone's radar?_"

One way or the other, something strange was definitely going on.

Juva and Li weren't liars, and they weren't known for exaggerating either. The looks on the men's faces after returning with Iroh and Zuko had been very... emotional. If they were lying about what they had seen, they were both such good actors they could easily join a traveling circus and perform on Fire Festivals.

Personally, Jee hadn't made up his mind yet. He trusted that Iroh would give them an explanation soon, and if Iroh said the rumors had no foundation, Jee would believe him.

Lieutenant Jee opened the door and stepped in. He bowed deeply at the old man sitting by his nephew's bed, wiping the teenager's forehead with a wet cloth.

Iroh looked Jee in the eye and nodded, but then he turned his attention back to the young Prince.

Zuko was in restless sleep. Jee could see that the Prince's left shoulder had been bandaged thoroughly.

"Sir. How is the Prince?" Jee started.

The question wasn't just about being sensitive or polite: several crew members had come to Jee to ask how Zuko was, and since everyone knew he'd gone to see Iroh, the Lieutenant wanted to have some answer to give to the men when he returned.

Also, Jee would've been lying if he'd said he wasn't personally quite attached to the Prince as well. So asking how Zuko was had nothing to do with manners, really.

"His shoulder has taken quite the banging, but Sergeant Cho patched it up", Iroh said, "It's the illness that really worries me. He has a high fever."

The man's voice was even despite all the concern it held: "There isn't much I or anyone else can do for Zuko right now, other than be here for him. Still, my nephew is a fighter, and I believe that he will fight his way through this."

"Do you know where this illness has come from?" Jee asked, "If it's the same one that's been going around, we have medicine for it..."

But Iroh shook his head: "I fear this isn't a natural illness."

Jee gulped. He didn't want to upset Iroh with questions, but he had

to now: "Is it... is it to do with this... dragon... thing?"

That question seemed to startle Iroh a bit. He looked at the Lieutenant again, but looked more surprised than angry.

"... No. I don't think it is", Iroh finally said, his tone unreadable.

Which was as good as conforming that there really was a dragon thing going on but the disease just happened to be unrelated.

"When I say this isn't a natural illness", Iroh went on, "I mean that it is an illness of spirit, not body."

His words worried Jee: "I didn't know an illness of spirit could manifest in such a... tangible way."

"Body and spirit are tightly connected. When one is suffering, it always affects both", Iroh's logic was hard to argue with.

"I suspect that this isn't an entirely new wound but an old wound that has reopened. Why it has happened now, after all these years, I do not know", Iroh's voice was resigned.

"Wait. You mean that you know exactly... oh. Right. You suspect that this is to do with... what happened three years ago", Jee put two and two together.

Iroh nodded: "An assault like the one my nephew was put through wounds a man on a deeper level than just flesh."

Jee nodded. He understood.

Being hurt by someone that close to you, someone you would've trusted with your life, leaves scars in the spirit, and those scars often last longer than physical injuries.

"After the Agni Kai my nephew lost everything. We all cope with loss in different ways. Some cry, some scream, some become bitter or angry. Zuko found his own method of coping. He took all his pain, frustration and disappointment and turned it into determination."

"Even after everything Ozai put him through, my nephew never stopped believing in him. The only way Zuko could cope with his banishment was by believing that it was necessary. That he had deserved it. That his father had been right", now Iroh's voice had a new layer to it. Hate.

"Zuko was still angry at his father, but he didn't know how to deal with that anger, so he ended up taking it out on others close to him. You and the rest of the crew have had to stand your share of my nephew's moods, and for this I apologize. But despite how sure and driven Zuko appears on the outside, he is still very young and confused. Very vulnerable."

"As I told you earlier today, my nephew has been going through many changes in his life lately. Now something has pierced through his armor of indifference so badly that the feelings he's been storing up inside have manifested as physical symptoms."

Iroh sighed: "So, as much as it pains me to see Zuko suffer like this, on the long run this could be a good thing. Letting go of everything you believe in is by no standards easy, but once it's been done, once Zuko has dealt with all his confusion and anger, he can finally start to heal."

"So far he has been trying to become the kind of Prince his father wants him to be. Soon, I hope, Zuko will be free to find his own way and grow into the kind of man he was always meant to be."

Jee nodded, mainly because he wasn't sure what to say. He felt a twinge of guilt for all the times he'd been especially rude or indifferent to the boy, while Iroh had held his patience.

"I think I understand and even agree with you on everything you just said", Jee finally answered, "Everything but one thing."

Iroh turned to look at him: "And what's that?"

"Zuko didn't loose everything when he was banished. He still has you", Jee said sincerely.

General Iroh looked mildly surprised by Jee's words, but soon his face got serious once more and he nodded.

Turning to tend to Zuko again, Iroh said: "I will not abandon my nephew."

Everyone who knew Iroh at all could have vouched for that. Even the Prince must have known it, even though he trusted hardly anyone.

Jee couldn't blame Zuko for his general distrust towards everyone. Not now that he knew the reason for it.

There were only so many times a man needed to be betrayed and abandoned before he would learn to trust no one.

No even us, his crew, Jee realized. Zuko couldn't risk trusting again because he would have also risked being let down again.

That's why he's kept all his secrets to himself.

All, including... Jee wasn't sure how to finish his sentence, not even inside his head.

"I just wished that was enough", Iroh sighed, "As much as I might consider Zuko a son, I am not his father, and I never will be. Sometimes it feels that years of understanding and patience from me isn't enough to mend the damage Ozai caused in few moments."

"Then again", Iroh added, "To be entirely truthful, Ozai's influence on Zuko was affecting my nephew's stability even long before the Agni Kai."

Normally Jee would have been shocked to hear anyone speak of the Fire Lord in such a criticizing tone. Undermining the Fire Lord's authority could be punishable by death.

Not even a Fire Lord's brother should have been allowed to imply that Ozai's influence was ever a negative thing, not even if they were only speaking of Ozai's parental skills, not his qualifications as a leader of a nation.

Now, however, Jee nodded.

Fire Lord or not, no one should have done to their own son the things that had been done to Zuko.

Although Jee had had his doubts about the Fire Lord's infinite wisdom and righteousness even before having been assigned to this useless mission, he had still never truly questioned the Fire Lord.

Surely, a leader of the greatest nation in the world was a wise and just ruler and had his people's best interest in mind when deciding things. That was something every soldier had to believe in. The moment you started questioning the people giving you your orders, you also began to question all the things you had done when following those orders.

When at war, the troops needed to have faith that even if they couldn't see the wisdom behind some of the decisions made, there still was a good reason for them. Someone greater than any one man was leading them, and that someone knew what he was doing.

Believing in anything else was demoralizing, and claiming anything else treason.

Lieutenant Jee had once during his otherwise promising military career made the mistake of questioning his orders. He had been told to lead his men to try one more time to take on a Earth Kingdom fortress they had been fighting for days. Jee had with all his heart believed that one more attack would have only resulted in the death of all of his men.

Therefore he had gone against his orders. Complimentary to that one mistake, he had been demoted and eventually ordered to serve under the banished Prince on his hopeless quest.

Lieutenant Jee's faith in his nation's leadership had faltered that day, but questioning the field generals was still different from questioning the Fire Lord.

But after the story General Iroh had shared with him and the rest of the crew that morning, Jee found it very hard to have faith in the Fire Lord's righteousness. Or even respect the man.

Zuko moved a bit, turning restlessly from one side to the other.

The boy had been brought aboard the ship wearing dark non-descriptive clothing (not an unusual look on the Prince), but now he was shirtless, the bandages supporting his shoulder the only thing covering his bare torso.

Zuko was lying under a thick blanket, but still enough of his skin was exposed that Jee could see a great number of bruises and scars on the boy. Most of them were old scars from years of relentless training and fighting, some looked fresher.

Beads of sweat were falling down Zuko's face. He was even paler than usually. He didn't look well at all.

"Is there...", Lieutenant Jee hesitated a moment before saying, "Is there a risk that Prince Zuko will not recover from this illness?"

Jee didn't want to add to the General's worry, but he had to know.

"All battles, even that of the spirit, have their risks. Inner conflict and grief can be enough to drown a person's will to live", Iroh admitted solemnly, but also added, "Then again, my nephew is a fighter. He has many times fought his way out of situations worst than this. I very strongly believe he will not only come out of this but that he will come out of this stronger than before."

Jee nodded. Everyone aboard the ship could agree that Prince Zuko was determinant to the point of unreasonable. Someone like that wasn't easy to snuff out, try as you may.

Still, Jee felt genuine worry for the Prince. Despite all the young man had been through, he had turned out a good kid, even a good leader.

The boy could be a bit rude from time to time, but deep down Prince Zuko, just like his uncle, cared for the safety of the men under him. There just weren't enough leaders like that in the Fire Nation Army.

It was a real shame that the Prince was unlikely to ever become the Fire Lord.

On another thought, if there truly was nothing anyone could do to help Zuko right now, Jee could think of matters that could be dealt with and needed to be addressed right now.

"General Iroh", the Lieutenant began, "I think you should have a word with the crew. Many of them are... concerned. And confused."

The General turned to look at Jee. He looked very tired, but he nodded.

"You are right. As much as I'd prefer not to leave my nephew's side, explanations are due", Iroh wiped Zuko's forehead one more time, "I am certain Zuko would prefer to be the one to tell the tale, but since he is not in a position to do that, it is necessary for me to step up."

Iroh rose from his chair and straightened his robes.

"Also, the story might be a bit clearer when told by me", Iroh added in a lighter tone, "My nephew has many virtues, but the art of story telling is certainly not one of them."

"I am going to go look for Cho to come and monitor Zuko"; Iroh continued, "Would you stay with him until Cho arrives?"

"I can look after the Prince the whole time", Jee answered, "In fact I insist."

The Lieutenant would have been kidding himself if he'd said he wasn't very curious to hear what the General had to say, but after having forced Iroh to leave his nephew's bedside, the least he could do was to take it up from here.

Iroh smiled a tired but genuine smile back at the Lieutenant and nodded.

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Seaman Juva was a bit overwhelmed by the attention he and Li had been getting since their return. When he'd seen the dragon turn into Prince Zuko, he had known things were weird, but he hadn't expected to be personally drawn in to the weirdness.

Thankfully Iroh had called all the men who weren't on guard duty to gather in the dining hall. They would finally get some real answers and everyone would stop bugging Juva about this.

Although the Seaman had been shocked at the time, now the fact that Prince Zuko was a dragon had sank in, and Juva was more worried for the boy than curious about his... condition. He had no idea how it was possible or why it had happened, but he knew that it had. Juva didn't question what he'd seen with his own eyes.

Zuko was a dragon, but more importantly, Zuko was unwell, and Juva wished there was more he could do to help.

Almost everyone was at the dining hall by now. Iroh hadn't shown up yet, so the room was quite loud as people all around Juva compared their theories on what was going on.

"Zuko isn't a dragon. I'm sure it was some kind of visual trick, maybe a spirit's doing", one voice told knowingly.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's not just what happened today that proves that the Prince really is a dragon. It also explains the weird behavior, and what the water spirit said..." another argued.

"Sure, and that shapeshifter seemed like such an upright guy that no way was it lying to us", someone commented with sarcasm.

"Well, if you are so sure the kid is dragon then do share with the rest of us how exactly that is possible. That someone from the royal line isn't a human at all. You'd think someone would've noticed something was funny with the kid when he hatched..."

"No, no, no. You aren't seeing the bigger picture here. My guess is that everyone in the royal line is actually a dragon. That's why they are so much better firebenders than anyone else."

Disbelieving silence followed the last speaker.

"What?" Oki asked as everyone stared at him, "It would explain a lot."

"Juva", someone called over the table, "You were there, right? What do you think? Was there something in Iroh's reaction that indicated he is actually a dragon as well?"

The man who had asked the question laughed but Juva didn't. The Seaman tried hard to think of something, anything, that would surely prove that Oki's theory was rubbish.

"Well", Juva said thoughtfully, "Iroh looked mainly just worried because Zuko was injured but... I'd be lying if I'd say he looked surprised when the dragon burst into flames and turned into Prince Zuko. He didn't look too scared, either. Just worried."

Everyone sitting near-by fell silent again, but now the mood was a lot less disbelieving. A lot of people appeared to be considering it.

"You know", Seaman Xu broke the silence, "I saw the dragon, too. It was flying above the canopy. I only saw it briefly but to me it looked pretty... big. And if that was just a teenager then can you imagine what General Iroh would look like. As a dragon, I mean."

Another silence followed as everyone pictured what Dragon Iroh would look like.

The Dragon of the West, Juva realized and shivered.

A door opened and Iroh stepped in, almost as if summoned by the mentioning of his name. The room fell very silent as people turned their attention to the old General.

"Thank you for coming here", Iroh began and smiled at the crew. His smile wasn't as wide as usually, his face slightly shadowed by worry.

"I'm sorry for having kept you waiting this long. I understand many of you are rather anxious to hear where we are at. I do not have all the answers, I'm afraid, but I will try to answer your questions the best I can."

"How's the Prince doing?" one the seamen asked.

Iroh smiled a sad smile: "My nephew is very ill, but everything that can be done has been done to ensure his recovery. Hopefully he'll be back on his feet in no time."

Many of the crew members nodded, relieved.

"I can also assure you that Zuko's illness is not contagious. Nor is it anything to do with his recent transformation."

You could have heard a needle drop.

"I understand that Seamen Juva and Li have already filled you in on the rather unbelievable yet true events that happened this morning", Iroh's brows furrowed a bit, "The timing of this coming out is a bit unfortunate for I am sure Zuko himself would have wanted to be here to explain this to you personally. But, the situation being what it is, it falls on me to speak on his behalf."

Iroh cleared his throat before continuing: "The short answer to a question I'm sure almost all of you are thinking about is yes, Zuko

can turn into a dragon. As unusual and even unbelievable as this may sound, it's quite real."

"Another answer would be that no, he hasn't always been able to. This ability is very new to him."

"So it's true then", Seaman Xu gasped, "Members of the royal family can turn into dragons."

Iroh blinked, looking completely baffled.

"I... What?... No!" Iroh said and shook his head vigorously, looking almost worried, "Members of the royal family can't turn into dragons. I'm not sure where you got that impression but it isn't the case. Zuko's transformation isn't so much to do with his family or other physical features. It is a spiritual connection."

"You see, in spirit my nephew has always had a special bond to the original firebenders. These past few years he has become more and more aware of this connection, and a few weeks ago certain unforeseeable events lead Zuko to form a whole different level of connection."

"While my nephew and I were scouting the areas around Kemi town, Zuko came across an ancient Dragon shrine on the mountains. As it was only a few days from the Winter Solstice, the time when the veil between our world and the Spirit world is at its thinnest, an old Dragon Spirit entered the mortal realm to have a word with the young Prince."

"Only Zuko and the said spirit know the exact details of this encounter, but from my nephew's description I have gathered that the spirit and Zuko got along rather well. So well, in fact, that the spirit decided to, in a sense, adopt Zuko. A rather radical event, consequences of which are only now unraveling."

"However, it is my understanding that this kind of transformation is not automatically a bad thing. Just very rare."

Juva thought Iroh had to be right about this kind of transformation being rare since not he nor anyone else in the room had ever heard of such a thing. And he guessed Iroh had a point on it not being a bad thing, too.

The fact that Prince Zuko happened to be exceptionally dragon-like could hardly be held against him since it was something all firebenders, in a sense, aspired to be.

Iroh took a deep breath before continuing: "The reason we haven't told any of this to any of you sooner is that, although I see nothing to be ashamed of in my nephew's recent change, I fear others might see it differently. Our nation's policy towards dragons has been... inconsistent, you might say, these past hundred years."

"On one hand, dragons are the original firebenders and thus they have and always will have a special significance to our culture and bending. However, as I'm sure you are all aware of, this respect towards our spiritual ancestors hasn't always manifested in pleasant or even very respectful ways."

Iroh kept a small break to let his words sink in: "There are people who wish my nephew harm, and if they learned of his condition, they would gladly spin it around so that the logical conclusion would be that he should be locked up or worse. Much worse."

"So the fact that we haven't told you of this before doesn't we don't trust you. You have been loyal to my nephew for almost three years. He trusts you and so do I. However, before I or Prince Zuko knew more of what was going on, we decided that the less people knew of this the less likely it was that the word would reach the wrong ears."

Juva felt both insulted and ashamed.

Insulted because, although Iroh and Zuko had no requirement to give them information on anything other than need-to-know basis, an irrational part of him felt like saying this was something so important that they should have been told of it.

Juva also felt ashamed because he knew that Iroh and Zuko hadn't told them because the crew's past actions had given them no reason to trust them to keep their mouths shut.

Hell, it was from us that Zhao learned that the Avatar had returned, and Zhao is definitely on top of the list of Zuko's enemies who would use this kind of information against him.

"I hope that once we understand this connection better it will be okay to let people know of it. For now, however, I believe it would be for the best if no one outside this ship's crew learned anything of any of the things I have told you here today. My nephew's safety could hang in the balance."

The old General spoke this bluntly only when he really meant what he was saying. Today his tone left absolutely no room for arguments.

Not that that's surprising. I doubt anything is more important to Iroh than Zuko's safety, Juva thought.

"General Iroh", Juva got up and spoke before stopping to consider whether that was wise or not, "I am sorry that I have spread sensitive information without prior permission to do so, and I swear on my honor that I will not tell anyone else of Zuko's condition."

Juva was a bit surprised by his own words and courage. Still, he had meant what he'd said.

As the man looked around he noticed he wasn't the only one who felt the same way. Several other men had gotten up and bowed at the old General. Slowly everyone caught on the drift and got up, in doing so promising their co-operation.

Soon every man in the room was on his feet.

A news of this magnitude and significance couldn't stay a secret forever, but it would be safe with them.

ooo

_ 'I let the Avatar go' . _

Iroh had been thinking Zuko's last words before falling unconscious over and over in his head while sitting next to his nephew's bed.

Iroh was rather sure that this statement was the key to why Zuko had fallen so ill right now. He also had a strong hunch that the Prince had meant more with his words than just that he had successfully helped the Avatar to escape from Zhao, as he had planned to do.

Zuko hadn't said that he'd helped the Avatar to escape but was then unable to apprehend the monk himself. He hadn't said that the Air Nomad _got away_. He had said he'd _let the Avatar go_.

The Avatar getting away was something that would've frustrated his nephew, but it wouldn't have caused as severe a response as a spiritual illness. Letting the Avatar go was a different story, though.

Although helping Zuko to let go of his obsession to catch the Avatar had been on Uncle's to-do list for a long time, this wasn't how he had intended it to happen. Iroh had planned to break Zuko's unwavering trust in Ozai's righteousness slowly over a long period of time to avoid exactly something like this from happening.

_Still, after all the things Zuko has learned of his past after finding Ursa, perhaps it was just a matter of time before he came to all the right conclusions about his mission on his very own. _

So, although things were happening much faster than Iroh had planned or anticipated, the situation wasn't entirely unwanted. Sudden or not, the main point was that Zuko had been ready for this.

After almost two days of illness Zuko's fever had finally broken, and although the Prince was still unconscious, some color had already returned to his cheeks.

Zuko would pull through, and that was the main point. All else could wait.

ooo

Zuko opened his eyes. His surroundings were dark, so it took the teenager a few moments to realize that he was in his room on board the ship.

Zuko supported his upper body with his elbows to get a better look around himself and noticed he wasn't alone in the room.

Uncle had nodded off next to Zuko's bed and was now snoring. Dark shadows had formed under Iroh's eyes, making him look much more tired and old than usually.

Zuko got up very quietly. He didn't want to wake Uncle, who had undoubtedly been up all night to looking after him.

Wow, Zuko realized, _It _is_ night time. I can't feel the sun outside the ship so it must be. But it was morning when I found

Uncle. How long was I out?_

Zuko's memories of what had happened after he had left the Avatar in the village by the volcano were hazy at best, but now that he was thinking about it, he was pretty sure there had been other people there when he had found Uncle.

The crew. At least some of his crew had been present.

That hadn't worried Zuko at the time. He had been in such hurry to go home that he would've landed on the deck of the ship without a second thought if that was where Uncle had been.

Now, however, he felt a small twinge of doubt. How much trouble had his unthinking move caused and to whom?

Zuko's worries lessened a bit as he thought things through and came to the conclusion that if something awful had happened while he was out of it, the situation wouldn't have been this calm now.

Zuko had been brought to his room and the low hum of the engine told him they were on the move again. Both things indicated that the truth coming out the way it had hadn't caused irreparable damage to his relationship with his crew.

They hadn't abandoned him just because he wasn't quite what he was supposed to be like.

Zuko felt hungry and a bit dizzy, but he wasn't tired. Not physically or mentally.

The Prince walked over to the door, opened it and soundlessly slipped to the corridor. Even though the passages were dark, Zuko had no difficulty to make his way to the bathroom.

Zuko locked the door behind him and then lit a few candles placed around the walls with his firebending. He was pleased to notice that although he was still in recovering, his firebending was almost to its usual level already. Lighting the candles was only a barely noticeably strain on his inner fire.

The bathroom was, in one word, nice.

Most rooms on board the ship were well-maintained but it would have been a stretch to call them pretty or pleasant. Space was scarce and thus used functionally.

Although the ship was the only home Zuko had known in almost three years, next to no thought or effort had been put into its decor. Even Zuko's own room had very few possessions in it.

There were two exceptions to the rule: Iroh's room, which was filled with all sorts of more or less useless objects the old man had hoarded on his travels, and the bathroom.

If it had been up to Zuko, the bathroom would've been just as bleak as the rest of the rooms. However, although Iroh had been willing to compromise on many comforts when he'd chosen to go with Zuko in his banishment, a pleasant hot bath hadn't been one of them.

So, naturally, Uncle was to be thanked for the colorful tiles and other decorations covering the walls and floor.

An elegant basin filled with water was raised on a counter. Zuko walked over to it.

The water was a bit cold to Zuko's touch but he didn't bother with heating it up. He splashed some cool water on his face and neck and felt immediately more awake.

While drying his face with a towel, Zuko noticed his hair could use a shave. There was a short, yet noticeable stubble on the usually bold area surrounding his phoenix tail.

Zuko's hair grew like weed. He had shaved it so many times in the last three years that he could've done the maneuver blindfolded while hanging upside down from the ceiling without having to worry about accidentally cutting himself.

Still, over the years he'd grown _used to_ cutting his hair here, in the bathroom, in front of a rather large mirror hanging on the wall behind the basin, so his shaving equipment was already in place.

The Prince opened a drawer on the counter and pulled out a small, sharp knife.

The mirror, like almost everything else in the room, had been put there by Uncle in the first months of Zuko's banishment. He suspected that the old man had purchased it to ensure that the teenager couldn't avoid seeing his own reflection whenever he stepped inside this room.

On the first few times after taking his bandages off, looking in the mirror had nearly made the young man cry. Not because the scar was so ugly, which it sort was, but more because it was a constant reminder of his shame.

Over time Zuko had slowly gotten over it, though. These days he rarely paid any attention to the red area around his left eye.

Now Zuko stopped to look at the scar more closely. The left side of his face looked much the same as it had almost three years ago when he'd seen it for the first time after the Agni Kai.

The scar was a darker shade of red where the blast had burnt him the worst. The surrounding areas weren't as badly damaged, but all in all the scar covered nearly half of the left side of his face, all the way from his nose to his ear.

The scar reached past his hairline, and the small stubble showcased that no hair grew on the scarred area.

Zuko turned his attention from his eye to his hair. The healers had shaved a considerable proportion of it when treating his eye right after the Agni Kai. After taking the bandages off Zuko had been hard-pressed to think of a what to do with it.

On one hand, Zuko's half-shaved head had looked ridiculous, putting extra emphasis on the damaged side of his face. On the other hand, he hadn't wanted to shave his head entirely.

For a firebender, long hair was a proof of one's skills. It told everyone that the bender was so precise that he could bend without accidentally setting his hair or clothes on fire.

Also, all members of the royal family sported a top knot. Shaving his head would've set Zuko even further apart from his family than his father's banishment already had.

In the end Zuko had gone with a compromise. He'd shaved most of his head to re-establish symmetry, but he hadn't touched his precious phoenix tail, which could be worn as a top knot once he returned to Fire Nation.

Come to think of it, a big part of Zuko's life had revolved around that day when he would return home. After his return he would have time to think about all sorts of stuff. Stuff like decor or making friends or leading the Fire Nation to be better than it ever was.

He would do all those things. Things normal people did. After he'd succeeded in his mission. Always later, never now.

Except that now Zuko _wasn't_ going home. At least not to the place he had once called that.

In other words, he was free to start doing things today, not later.

Zuko looked at his hair.

Oddly enough, instead of trying to hide the scar, Zuko had ended up leaving it as exposed as humanly possible. Since he _couldn't_ hide it, trying to do so would've only let people know just how ashamed of it he was.

So instead he had worn it proudly like a battle scar.

Zuko was already very accustomed to his unusual hairdo, but today it looked odd to him. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he couldn't help but to be surprised at how much he had changed.

He looked nothing like that ten-year-old round-eyed child he had once been, and it wasn't because of the scar or the hair.

He looked angry and sad and tired. He looked scary.

It's not what you're wearing but how you wear it.

Zuko lifted the blade but stopped mid-movement to consider what he was doing.

Suddenly the fact that he had been doing the same thing for three years didn't mean a thing. The only question that mattered was whether he wanted to shave his head today and, if so, why.

Zuko didn't want to hide, but what was the worst that could happen if he let his hair grow? People would see that no hair grew on the damaged area of the face?

Suddenly his hairdo, his warrior's hairdo, wasn't serving its

purpose. He was still hiding behind it, hiding his shame. Not behind hair but behind a scary mask that drew people's attention away from the scar to the overall intimidation.

Instead of hiding the scar he had grown an attitude to match it.

A bitter young man. That's what I look like.

Zuko made his cut without hesitation.

ooo

A small thump woke Iroh from his sleep. Even through the haze he immediately grasped the most important thing about his surroundings: Zuko wasn't on his bed.

Uncle blinked, now wide awake. He turned to look at direction the sound had come from.

By the door stood a young, pale man.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you", Zuko said and smiled apologetically.

Iroh's jaw hang open. For once in his life, he wasn't sure what to say, so instead he got up, walked over to his nephew and hugged the young man tightly.

"You okay?" Zuko sounded a bit worried.

"Me?" Uncle almost laughed as he pulled back from the boy, "_I'm_ fine. I'm just happy that you're back."

"I was only gone a moment", Zuko sounded still a bit worried, obviously trying to determine what exactly had happened to cause such an overwhelming response.

"Oh, I know", Uncle assured him with a wide smile on his face and tears in his eyes, "I know."

Iroh would've wanted to hold on to his nephew or at the very least guide him back to bed, but he didn't. The boy had known how to stand on his own two feet for a long time now.

"So, a new style?" Uncle raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Thought I'd try something different for a change", the teenager shrugged, "You like it?"

"Suits you", Iroh said and ran his hand through Zuko's short hair. The boy didn't flinch away from the touch, not even when Iroh brushed the scarred side.

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A/N

The notion that the crew would think Zuko's condition is a ROYAL secret came from Schwann.

Team Avatar's reactions on Uncle's story and more on Zuko's new heading in the next chapter.

BTW I have now revised the spelling on the previous chapter (which it definitely needed). It's probably still not perfect but it should be better :)

25. A Night Out

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"Dragon Warriors?" Uncle asked.

"Those are the exacts words Tuli used", Zuko shrugged, "Do they mean anything to you?"

Uncle stroked his beard, looking thoughtful: "No. Unfortunately I have never heard of such a thing."

The Prince looked down and sighed.

Zuko and Iroh were standing on the deck of the ship. The younger man was leaning against the railing and looking at the scenery passing by.

Now Zuko turned his gaze down at the water swirling in the ship's wake. It looked playful and innocent and sort of reminded him of a certain Air Nomad.

"...But", Uncle went on, "I do know _someone_ who might know more."

Zuko looked up again, his eyes wide with surprise.

_Could Uncle be talking about... Could he possible mean... _the_ original firebenders?_

"Do you mean we should", Zuko quickly glanced around to make sure no one but Uncle would hear his next words, "go look for dragons?"

The Prince was more excited by the thought than he had expected himself to be. Ever since Iroh had revealed to him a few weeks back that dragons weren't completely extinct, he had had conflicting opinions about it. A part of him feared that if he ever met real dragons, they would reject him.

However, meeting a dragon would be pretty awesome. Also, Tuli didn't have a problem with Zuko, so maybe that was an indication that living dragons wouldn't spit fire on him, either.

Uncle turned to Zuko, looking mildly surprised: "Uh, no, that's not what I meant."

Iroh began to explain: "Most of my knowledge on dragons is based on that meeting I had with two old firebending masters decades ago, as I already told you. And yes, Ran and Shaw might understand your situation better than anyone else. They might even be the only living beings holding the answers we're looking for. However, there are reasons why we shouldn't go look for them. At least not

yet."

"First", Iroh sighed, "I gave an oath never to reveal the last dragons' whereabouts to anyone. However, taking in consideration your most unusual situation, I think even the Sun Warriors might be okay with me bending the rules on that one."

"A more pressing reason is the distance. The old dragons reside in the Fire Nation. So long as you are banished we can't just sail in. Also, they live virtually on the other side of the world. Even if we got past the blockade without difficulties, the trip there and back would take weeks, perhaps even months."

Zuko nodded. He understood what Uncle was getting at: "You're right. If we wish to keep both Zhao and the Air Nomad more or less within an arm's reach, we can't just sail to the opposite direction and disappear for months."

Uncle nodded.

They had already agreed that although Zuko was no longer actively trying to capture the Avatar, it would be foolish to presume that it was suddenly safe to let the Air Nomad run around doing whatever he wanted. The kid was still a potential threat to everyone's safety and, as such, his actions had to be monitored closely.

Also, Zhao was still after the boy.

Since the Admiral had become no less dangerous in the past few days and they still didn't know what his secret plan exactly was, it would've been foolish not to keep tabs on him as well.

So, for now, the plan was to keep heading north and to try in the meanwhile learn more of the Avatar's and Zhao's plans. Also, as Uncle had just brought up, now they finally had time to really look into the whole dragon thing.

"So, if you weren't talking about dragons, who then?" Zuko asked.

Iroh smiled innocently: "An old friend of mine happens to live in a Fire Nation colony not far from here. Stopping there would only slow us down a few hours and since the colony is north from our current location, going there would in no ways put us on a detour."

"An old friend", Zuko repeated thoughtfully, "Do I know him?"

Iroh laughed: "No. We go back a long time. Since before you were born, actually. I haven't seen her in years, but we correspond from time to time."

Her, Zuko thought numbly. The young man found himself shivering despite the fact that the afternoon sun was beating down on his back relentlessly.

I seriously hope she isn't some old... Gah, I can't even think that thought through.

"In fact" Iroh went on, oblivious to his nephew's discomfort, "I've already taken the liberty of informing her that I'm planning to stop

by this evening."

"This evening?" Zuko was startled, "If we intend to get there that fast we have to give the crew our new heading as soon as possible."

"Don't worry about that. I already did", Iroh replied casually.

Zuko's face fell: "When?"

"This morning."

"Right", Zuko tried to wrap his head around what he'd just been told, "So, when you asked me today if I would like to know more about my connection to dragons, you were just asking out of courtesy. In reality you had already made all sorts of arrangements."

Uncle opened his mouth but no words came out.

Zuko went on: "I mean, you must have been planning this meeting for some time now if you had time to write to her. I mean, it's good that the crew knows where we are going and that your friend knows to be expecting a visit, but when were you planning to let me in on this? Before or after we docked in?"

"Uh, well... You were pretty out of it for almost two days", Uncle finally managed.

Zuko rolled his eyes, but more out of amusement than irritation. After all, Uncle had obviously meant well.

Also, the Prince was rather curious to learn more of what was going on, so he was surprisingly okay with the fact that Iroh had made plans behind his back.

"Fine", Zuko said and smiled to let his uncle know he wasn't angry with him, "When and where are we going to meet this... friend of yours?"

"Actually" Uncle rubbed the back of his head and smiled apologetically, "I was going to go meet her alone. Privately."

Zuko's eyes widened as he tried hard not to imagine what that meant.

"Oh no, I didn't mean it like that", Iroh hurriedly added as he saw his nephew's usually pale cheeks turn bright red, "We are old friends, but nothing more. The reason why I'm meeting her alone is that I know her through a club of sorts, and it is a members-only kind of meeting."

Zuko was relieved to hear that Uncle was just a member in a secret club. Truly relieved.

I wonder what kind of club it is? Well, if Uncle thought it important for me to know, he would've told me. He is entitled to his secrets.

"The meeting shouldn't take too long", Uncle went on with a wide smile on his face, "You won't even have time to miss me, I'm sure."

There was something playful about the look on Iroh's face, which immediately made Zuko cautious: "...Okay. Why?"

"Because I haven't told you the best part yet: tonight, the colony is hosting a Fire Festival."

And suddenly everything fell in place. The situation suddenly made perfect sense. Iroh's hurry to get to the colony tonight, the secrecy...

This stop wasn't about learning more about Dragon Warriors. Or, at least, it wasn't _just_ about that.

Uncle wants me to... have fun.

And he was so afraid that I'd say 'no' or come up with some reason why tonight was no good that he arranged the whole thing behind my back.

Zuko would've been irritated by Iroh's nursing attitude if it weren't for the fact that just a few months ago it would've taken exactly this level of sneakiness to get Zuko to attend a Fire Festival.

Prince Zuko didn't used to have time for taking a night out, especially not in order to participate in some stupid peasant holiday.

Having fun. Another thing I planned to do once my honor was restored, but not a day sooner.

Uncle was looking at the young man expectantly, obviously curious to hear his response.

"A Fire Festival" Zuko said and shrugged, "Why not. Sounds like it could be fun."

ooo

"Look", Aang said and pointed at a poster on a bulletin board, "They are holding a Fire Festival in a near-by Fire Nation colony tonight. That sounds like fun. Wouldn't it be really cool to go there?"

"Are you kidding me?" Sokka asked, "Why would we want to walk into our enemy's lair voluntarily? If we go there, nothing good is gonna come out of it. Trust me."

"Funny", Katara put in, her tone sarcastic, "I thought Mister eager-to-learn-more-about-different-cultures wouldn't want to miss a change like this for anything."

Aang's face lit up: "Katara is right! Just a few days ago you told me that because I'm the Avatar I have to learn all sorts of stuff about the other elements, including culture. I may never get a better chance to see some contemporary, authentic Fire Nation culture."

"Plus, the poster says there will be firebending performances. If we go, I could study both culture and firebending from up close."

"I definitely didn't say anything about going to a Fire Nation colony being a good idea", Sokka stated.

"The way I remember it", Katara pointed out, rolling her eyes, "you were really keen on the whole 'let's study other cultures' plan."

ooo

Four days earlier

"We need a plan."

Sokka turned to look at Katara and Aang. All children were sitting on Appa's saddle.

They had decided to keep flying so long as they still had daylight. It was probably an unnecessary precaution, but Sokka hadn't felt like taking his chances with sticking too close to the village by the volcano.

Not when they knew Prince Zuko was hiking somewhere in the vicinity, actively looking for the Avatar.

The kids had left the village hours ago and had been talking non-stop ever since. There had been much catching up to do.

Aang had told Sokka and Katara about his eventful evening.

Likewise, Sokka and Katara had had quite a tale to tell. They had told their friend of what they'd been through while on board the Fire Nation ship, especially what they had learned while listening in on their captors.

Now the sun had begun to set, which reminded Sokka that they still hadn't covered the most important topic.

"Seriously, though", the Water Tribe boy went on, "I know we sort of already talked about getting a plan after meeting the Militia, but at the time we only decided to get a plan some time in the future. I think that time is now. Or maybe, like, yesterday."

Sokka half expected Aang to go on the defensive again.

Last time they had had a talk about their hopes and plans for the future, Aang had taken it very personally, viewing it as a sign of distrust towards his decision not to cooperate with the Militia.

Now, however, Aang just nodded. He looked uncharacteristically serious: "I agree."

Katara, too, nodded.

"So, Aang", Sokka began, "The stuff that Iroh said about the Avatar having to spend years and years studying elements and culture. Was

that, I don't know, news to you?"

"Well, no", Aang admitted, "When the monks told me I was the Avatar they said that I would spend four years studying each element. Only then could I become a fully realized Avatar."

"But Avatar Roku said it's okay if Aang finishes his training faster, so that isn't really a problem", Katara assured her companions.

"Right", Sokka agreed, "I remember that Avatar Roku gave Aang the go-ahead to speed things up a bit. I do. But still, and without at all trying to add any pressure, I gotta point out that Iroh wasn't totally wrong when he said that we've still got a long way to go."

Aang looked frustrated: "What can I do about that? I can't really get a whole lot better at waterbending before we reach the North Pole."

Sokka lifted his hands in a placating gesture: "I know, I know. But I wasn't talking about waterbending. According to Iroh, there is more to being the Avatar than just mastering all bendings. Didn't the monks say anything about that?"

"...No."

"You mean, like, they gave you absolutely no tips on stuff like how to fight spirits or how to be a good Avatar or anything like that?"

Aang shook his head.

"They must have thought there would be plenty of time to teach Aang everything he needed to know", Katara put in, "The Avatars before him only started learning the other elements when they were older. The monks didn't know Aang would have to learn them all while he's only twelve."

Sokka could see his sister's point.

"Yeah", Aang said and smiled at Katara, "Also, the situation really isn't as bad as you guys think because I already know a lot of stuff about different cultures."

"Really?" Sokka asked.

"Sure", Aang's smile widened, "I used to have friends from all four nations before the war."

Sokka gaped at the younger boy, unsure of what to say. Aang wasn't wrong, but he wasn't right either.

Just because Aang had known some people from other nations a hundred years ago didn't mean he understood or appreciated the other cultures of today.

In Sokka's experience, Aang was far from a culture-sensitive guy. The kid knew what people from different cultures were stereotypically supposed to be like, but he had a hard time getting it in his head

that not all people were alike just because they came from the same nation.

_Well, why change a good opinion just because it might not be based on anything? _Sokka thought to himself and sighed.

Aang had strong opinions about other cultures, but that wasn't really a good thing.

"Look, Aang, I don't think that will be enough. Even if your knowledge on the other cultures is based on your personal experiences, it is seriously out of date. Plus, I kind of doubt that you _ever_ understood the other cultures on the kind of level that an Avatar is expected to."

Aang looked surprised and sad. Sokka didn't want to be hard on the boy, but he also had no intentions of lying to him to protect his feelings: "I mean, it's a different thing to _know_ someone from the Water Tribes than to _be_ someone from the Water Tribes."

Aang still looked sad, but he nodded: "Okay. I guess I'll just have to try to learn as much as I can about each nation's culture while on my way to my bending masters."

Sokka gave Aang thumbs up: "Exactly."

"Look", Katara pitched in, "As much as learning culture is fun and all, I don't completely agree with Sokka on this."

Sokka eyed his sister, but Katara wasn't trying to pick a fight.

"I'm not saying that you're wrong", she said, "I just think that learning bending and maybe a thing or two about how to deal with spirits should be Aang's first priority, and since time is something we don't have abundant, he should just focus on bending practices."

"To be a good Avatar, Aang needs to learn a lot. However, Aang doesn't have to be a great Avatar by the end of the next summer. He does, however, have to be powerful enough to defeat the Fire Lord by then."

"But I want to be a great Avatar!" Aang protested.

"And I'm sure you will be", Katara smiled at the boy, "The best. My point is that you don't have to be that _yet_."

"Yeah", Sokka allowed, rubbing his chin, "You have a point there. Still, whatever we do, I think we loose nothing by starting to plan a little further ahead than just what we're going to do at the North Pole or even how we're going to end this war."

"Even if we focus on bending studies for now, it can't hurt to keep our eyes and ears open for the other stuff as well. That way you'll be that much closer to a fully realized Avatar by the time we destroy the Fire Lord."

"But", Aang looked down at his shoes, "I don't actually want to _hurt_ anyone."

Both Water Tribe kids looked clueless.

"Uh, and what's that to do with anything?" Sokka inquired.

Aang gulped: "It's just... I'm not sure if I can defeat the Fire Lord. Not if defeating him would mean I would have to... destroy him. I'm a pacifist. I respect all life."

"Not this one", Katara's tone was dark and serious, "If anyone is getting what's coming for him, it's the Fire Lord. He's the one behind this whole war. He's brought nothing but misery and pain to everyone for over a hundred years."

"I can't believe I'm saying this", Sokka put in, "But I sort of doubt that the current Fire Lord had any more to do with starting the hundred-year war than I did."

Katara rolled her eyes: "Don't get cute on me. You know what I meant. And even if the current Fire Lord didn't start the war, he sure hasn't ended it, either. And then there's that thing he did to his own son."

For a while, all three kids sat in silence. The team's earlier enthusiasm and adventurous spirit was fading away fast.

"That thing that happened to Zuko" Aang suddenly spoke, "It's just awful."

The Air Nomad looked like he had just realized the world wasn't always a fair place. Katara wrapped her arm around Aang's shoulder comfortingly, but she didn't say anything.

Sokka couldn't think of anything comforting to say, either. No words would make what had happened to Prince Zuko anything other than awful.

Sure, the Prince was their enemy.

And still... Sokka couldn't help but to sympathize the angry jerk.

Being told to fight your father, which of course you won't do. When you refuse, you get your face burned by your own father. And then you're told it's all your fault and you can never return home...

Sokka shivered.

His father, Hakoda, would never have done anything like that to him. Not ever. Not in a million years.

But... if I messed up real bad and were banished and could only win back father's love by doing a stupid task, I would.

In a heartbeat.

"The Fire Lord is evil and ruthless", Katara suddenly broke the silence, "He has to be defeated. No matter what it takes."

Aang gulped: "But.. are you sure that what that Iroh guy told you was the truth. I mean, you said you didn't trust him. Maybe he just lied..."

Katara and Sokka exchanged a look.

Although they had initially more or less agreed that Iroh was a liar, neither was convinced of that now. Actually, after giving it a lot of thought, Sokka was rather convinced of the opposite. Most of the stuff Iroh had said was probably the truth. At least from a Fire Nation point of view.

Sokka shook his head: "I don't think Iroh lied. I mean, everyone knows you can't trust a firebender, but what reason would Iroh have had to lie about this... thing? Heck, why would anyone from the Fire Nation go around creating bad publicity for the Fire Lord?"

"As far as we know, all Fire Nation citizens respect their leader. Even the Fire Sages were more loyal to the Fire Lord than the Avatar. It would be weird if the brother of the Fire Lord talked trash about him for no reason, right?"

"It isn't possible that Iroh was somehow mistaken, either. He is Zuko's uncle and he was there when it happened. Also, we don't know much about the Fire Lord but we have met Prince Zuko, and Iroh's story would kinda explain a lot about why the angry jerk is so... angry."

"I don't get it", Aang said, looking confused, "If Zuko's father was so awful to him, why is Zuko trying to please him by capturing me?"

"Because the Fire Lord is his father", Sokka said, but as he saw that Aang still looked confused, he added, "I mean, wouldn't anyone do just about anything for their father?"

"No", Katara responded, "They wouldn't. Not if their father was evil."

"Yeah, like I said, it doesn't make any sense", Aang chimed in.

Sokka wasn't sure why his companions were having such difficult time grasping the obvious. The fire Lord was Zuko's father.

Sokka would've done almost anything to please his father and to prove that he was a good warrior. He wouldn't have tried to capture Aang, of course, but almost anything else.

Sokka took a breath to give himself time to organize his thoughts: "Well, it's not like Zuko has just one reason to want to capture you. From what Iroh said, at least I was left with the impression that Zuko is nowadays primarily into capturing you because he thinks you are dangerous."

Aang looked openly surprised: "Dangerous? Me? But I'm twelve. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Of course you don't", Katara smiled at Aang reassuringly.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure not even Zuko thinks you want to hurt anyone", Sokka clarified, "But, like I said, Zuko has heard of what happened with Jet and the dam and now he thinks you are, how to best put it, a loose canon?"

"But he's wrong", Katara added, "He doesn't know you like we do."

Sokka sighed.

But what if he isn't?

Still, Katara was sort of right.

Knowing that the Fire Nation sort of maybe has a kind of valid reason to fear and hate the Avatar changes nothing, Sokka felt the need to remind himself.

Even if Aang is a bit careless sometimes, so what? Everyone makes mistakes. At least Aang isn't out to actively hurt innocent people like the Fire Nation is.

Aang was the good guy. Zuko was the bad guy. That was just how things were.

ooo

The present

"Fine, I was the one who spoke highly of studying cultures. But I still think that going to the Fire Festival is a really bad idea", Sokka tried to convince the others.

"Oh, look", Aang had rounded the bulletin board, "This poster has my picture in it."

"Aang, that is a wanted poster", Sokka said solemnly, "Which is another reason why we shouldn't go. We are going to get into a lot of trouble if anyone recognizes us."

"Then we better make sure they don't", Katara smiled, "We'll go in disguised."

"Yeah", Sokka rolled his eyes, "And we've never gotten into a lot of trouble while disguised."

Aang put down his wanted poster, but then he picked up another: "Look! There's a wanted poster for the Blue Spirit as well!"

"See, I told you he was real", Aang exclaimed happily and nearly hugged the poster, "And this also means that he got away, because they wouldn't be putting up wanted posters for him if he'd been caught."

Katara sighed and put her hand on Aang's shoulder: "Aang, when we talked about your mystery savior earlier we weren't trying to say that we didn't believe he existed. I mean, I'm happy to hear that your friend is okay, I really am, but I just don't want you to get your hopes up too soon, that's all."

"What do you mean?" Aang looked at her wide-eyed. Katara looked to her brother for support.

"The thing is", Sokka explained, "You told us that this Blue Spirit guy is actually an airbender but, from what you described, I'm not so sure."

"You have to admit that it is possible that you just miss your people so much that you sort of made-believe that this guy was an airbender even when he wasn't."

Aang's eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms: "I didn't make-believe that he airbended!"

"We just want you to be ready for the possibility that there are no more airbenders. And even if there are, they might not be anything like the Air Nomads you knew", Katara smiled a sad smile at the boy.

Ever since Aang had four days ago announced that he'd met another airbender, Sokka and Katara had agreed that they needed to have a serious conversation about the topic with the monk. After all, the last time Aang had been convinced that not all airbenders were gone, it had all ended with the Air Nomad finding his mentor's dead body and nearly blowing them all off the face of a mountain.

They didn't want to have to go through the Southern Air Temple all over again.

Sokka was really happy that Katara was taking the lead on the conversation. Aang had to hear this stuff, but Katara could break the news to him more gently.

"Fine", Aang sighed, "I'll be prepared for the worst. But I still believe that the Blue Spirit is an airbender, and even if he isn't, there could be other airbenders somewhere out there."

Katara nodded hesitantly: "There could be."

But it's not very likely, Sokka thought to himself, Before we found Aang, no one had seen an Air Nomad for almost a hundred years._

"Sokka", Aang turned to the Water Tribe boy, "You said we should have a plan. I think that a part of that plan should be that we try to find out if there are any airbenders still left."

"That sounds... reasonable", Sokka said and smiled at the boy, "If they have been hiding a hundred years, finding them won't be easy, but we can of course try."

Katara brushed Aang's back one more time. Then she changed the topic: "Well, we better get going. We don't want to be late for the Festival, do we?"

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Zuko had been at the Fire Festival for over an hour now, and he still wasn't sure if he was having fun or not.

"A fire flake, sir?" Seaman Oki asked and handed over a bag of flakes.

"Uh, sure", Zuko took a few flakes. He didn't particularly like fire flakes (they were a bit too mild for his taste), but it felt polite to accept the man's offer nonetheless.

I'm hanging out with my crew.

Whether that was adding to the fun or taking from it, Zuko wasn't quite sure.

On one hand, the Prince was grateful for the company. Zuko didn't have much experience on hanging out, so having other people along really helped him to get a better idea of what people usually did on this sort of occasions.

Also, he was rather fond of his crew in general, and didn't hang out with them nearly as often as he probably should have.

So they weren't bad company. Everything was just so...
awkward.

While Zuko had been ill Uncle had told the crew that Zuko was a dragon. Well, kind of a dragon.

The Prince had been very touched to hear that they hadn't abandoned him or thought worse of him for it, and that the crew had even sworn to keep his secret for as long as possible.

The only con was that now that everyone knew, they kept giving him these looks.

Not exactly bad looks, but not good either. It was like they were expecting him to burst into flames and turn into a fiery beast at any given moment.

Of course they were all going to great lengths to act casually around him (Zuko suspected Uncle had told them to do that) but they weren't very good at it.

Since they had come to the colony to catch up with some old friends and attend a party, it would've been really weird not to hand out as many shore leaves as possible.

Consequently, almost the entire crew was out making a night of it. Not all of them were hanging out with Zuko, of course, but quite a few anyway. The Prince suspected his uncle had asked them to do that, as well.

They were all wearing civilian clothes. Although soldiers were allowed to wear their armors even off-duty, most preferred not to. They were here to have a good time, not to maintain order. Tonight that was somebody else's job.

So far they'd been mainly just walking around and getting to know what kind of attractions this particular Festival had to offer. Zuko wasn't exceptionally impressed by anything he'd seen yet, but he tried to keep an open mind.

There had been a few sort of interesting firebending shows, but to someone who'd seen as much real firebending in his life as Zuko had, they didn't offer much excitement or a sense of danger.

Zuko wasn't sure if the Festival was living up to his expectations or not, because he hadn't really had any. Well, except maybe one.

Most people around them were wearing masks of varying sorts. No one in his company had asked the Prince whether he wanted to buy a mask or not. They probably feared that implying that Zuko should cover his face was insensitive.

Truth be told, Zuko wouldn't have been insulted. Not at all. Buying a mask was something he'd wanted to do ever since he'd left his old mask at Pohuai Stronghold.

However, that purchase was something Zuko didn't want to do in front of his crew.

It wasn't even a matter of whether he trusted them or not. It was a matter of liability. Zuko would be damned before he'd make his crew his unwitting partners in crime.

"So", Sergeant Jiri put in, "I think we've pretty much seen the best shows by now, so how about we move inside."

"Inside?" Zuko wasn't quite following, "Where?"

"Uh", the man looked rather awkward, "You know, to get some... beverages."

"Oh", Zuko felt like slapping himself on the face.

There was absolutely no drinking of anything stronger than Uncle's tea on board Zuko's ship. Tonight they were on a leave, though, so of course they were all going out drinking. Which would probably be pretty awkward with Zuko, their 16-year-old boss, there.

Zuko's face spread into a genuine smile. The timing of this was perfect.

"Oh, yeah, sure", Zuko said, "You go right ahead."

"Aren't you coming with us, sir?"

"In a minute. I just saw an interesting", Zuko looked around himself, trying desperately to come up with a plausible excuse, "Puppet show. Earlier."

Zuko felt like slapping himself for not coming up with a better reason. Hand puppet shows were for 5-year-olds. Now his entire crew would definitely think he was too young to drink.

"Okay", Sergeant Cho said, his casual smile exceptionally convincing, "We'll meet up later then. You sure you'll be fine on your own, though?"

"Yeah, I think after all I've been through I'll be just fine in this..." but this time Zuko caught on the mood around him a bit faster, "Oh. You meant that as a joke."

At seeing Zuko's expression, Cho burst into laugh, but the rest of the crew looked rather serious.

They are afraid to have a laugh at my expense, Zuko realized.

The Prince smiled widely, trying to signal that it was okay. He could laugh at himself, and so could his crew. He was okay with it. Really.

"See you later", Cho said while wiping a tear from his eye.

Zuko smiled and waved at his crew for one final time as they parted ways.

Hopefully they think that I'm not really going to see a puppet show but was just trying to get out of a situation that would've been awkward for all of us, Zuko thought as he made his way towards a cart selling masks.

It took Zuko a while to find what he was looking for. He had to go through three different carts and dozens of masks before he found the right one.

The Blue Spirit had never been hugely popular, perhaps because it looked so scary. Oddly enough, Zuko had immediately fell in love with that particular character after he'd decided his sneaking outfit required a mask and started to look for one. It had already been two years from that day.

These days, with wanted posters all around, sporting this particular mask had its risks as well. For most people, the possibility of getting arrested didn't add to the mask's appeal.

As Zuko looked at the blue opera mask in his hand, he wasn't sure whether he should buy it or not.

I'm not a criminal. Why should I hide my face? I'm not ashamed of the things I do.

When Zuko put the mask on and took on the identity of the Blue Spirit, he felt more free of his duties as a Prince. However, now that he'd decided not to carry out his mission anyway, a means to escape from himself felt a bit redundant.

He was free, with or without the mask.

"You gonna buy that or what?" A bored looking man behind the cart asked dubiously.

"...Yes."

Zuko paid for the mask and then quickly hid it in under his cloak.

Having a mask might have been about getting away, but it wasn't _just_ about that. It was a practical thing to have when hiding in shadows, and Zuko's ninja master had told him to always dress for the occasion.

Also, the Blue Spirit had a reputation. That could come in handy one day.

The Avatar thinks he's an airbender, Zuko suddenly remembered.

That could end badly. But... it could also be useful. If the Avatar was about to do something stupid and needed to be talked out of it, he'd be likelier to listen to 'his countryman' than the Prince of Fire Nation any day.

Now that Zuko had successfully carried out his secret assignment, he wasn't quite sure what to do next.

Truth be told, going to look for the mask hadn't been the Prince's _only_ reason for wanting to get away. Zuko wasn't too keen on the idea of spending the rest of the evening in a pub with his crew.

_Maybe I should just head back for the ship. This has certainly been enough _fun_ for one evening, right?_

"... I'm the Fire Lord, and ain't no one gonna stop me."

Zuko had to turn to look. He nearly laughed when he realized that what he was looking at was a puppet show. A small hand puppet roughly the likeness of a Fire Lord had just entered the stage.

Zuko smiled. It was kind of ironic that he was ending up watching a puppet show after all, but what the hell. The rest of the audience consisted of small children, so Zuko was a tad too embarrassed to sit down with them. Instead he hovered in the background.

Man, I used to love watching these things when I was small. Unlike everything the Ember Island Players performed, puppet shows always had exciting twists and character development.

Zuko crossed his arms and leaned on a wooden pillar.

He hadn't been to a puppet show in ages. The Prince had a feeling he hadn't seen this particular play before, although it was impossible to be sure after having seen so little of it.

The Fire Lord, which usually represented a general idea of a Fire Lord rather than any particular person holding the throne, was one of the most frequently featured characters. He was in virtually every play.

When Zuko had been six years old, he'd been very proud of the fact that his grandfather was so popular a character. It was one of the reasons why he'd liked hand puppet shows so much. He had hoped that one day people would tell tales of Prince Zuko's great deeds.

I was such a naive kid, Zuko sighed.

But hey, who doesn't have a soft spot for hand puppets, right?

The play moved on as a second character entered the stage. It was an Earth Kingdom soldier in a traditional green uniform. The man was apparently a bender since the puppet was holding a boulder in its

hand.

The Fire Lord was looking the other way, so he didn't notice the earthbender approaching menacingly.

"What's out."

"He's behind you."

Several kids had begun to talk simultaneously, so caught up in the play that they were actually shouting warnings at a puppet.

Zuko was amused by this. He would've assured the kids that these plays didn't generally end with the death of the Fire Lord, but he didn't want to spoil the ending.

On the last minute, the Fire Lord turned around and firebent the other puppet off the stage.

The kids cheered, but Zuko didn't. He felt numb more than anything.

What sort of lesson was that supposed to teach? That if you are more powerful than others it's okay to use violence as a means of solving your problems?

Granted, the other guy was from an enemy nation, but that can't be the lesson, right? That it's okay to use violence on people from other nations?

_Yeah, yeah, we are at war, but this is a _kiddie show_, for crying out loud!_

Is this really the kind of world view we want to teach to our children? That because the Fire Lord is a powerful bender he is always right and gets to burn whoever opposes him even the slightest?

Zuko realized his fists were starting to heat up and took a few deep breaths to calm himself.

It's just a stupid play, the Prince reminded himself.

The play wasn't very different from the ones Zuko had seen as a child, but somehow he couldn't stomach it.

The plot hadn't changed, but Zuko had.

_And it isn't _just_ a play. It's a play for children. Fire Nation kids grow up watching these plays._

No wonder no one ever questions whether the war is necessary. Or if the Fire Lord can be wrong.

Another puppet show had already begun but Zuko had seen enough plays for one night. The Prince turned around and walked away.

Zuko noticed that a crowd had gathered in front of a large stage. On it a firebender was trying to save a masked girl tied to a chair from a dragon made of fire.

He was supposedly trying to tame the dragon, but it was constantly on the verge of getting away from his leash and charging at the helpless woman.

Zuko stopped to look. The plot of the performance wasn't very original and it didn't portray an accurate picture of what the original firebenders were like, but it had dragons in it.

Anything that had dragons in it couldn't be all bad.

The show was about to reach its finale where the firebender undoubtedly saved the girl at the last minute, but then something very strange happened.

Another performer appeared out of nowhere and destroyed the fire dragon with... airbending?

No - way.

Zuko could no longer fight the urge to slap himself on the face.

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A/N:

Thank you for everyone for reviewing! The feedback really encourages me to update fast.

26. Mysterious Stranger

A/N

The last chapter got more reviews than any before. Thank you!

I got several reviews wondering about the puppet scene, asking why Zuko over-reacted so much to a silly play. I didn't underline it in the chapter, but since it wasn't as clear to everyone as I thought it was, I'll answer to that here.

It is true that the Fire Lord character is acting in self-defense when attacking the 'evil earthbender' and thus Zuko's reaction to his deed is uncalled for.

However, the reason why Zuko over-reacts isn't _really_ the one he gives to the readers ('this is unfair and brainwashing'). Granted, he is unhappy to see that Fire Nation children are brought up hating the other nations (just like he himself was), but this isn't a news to him. Nor is it the real reason he is so upset.

The real reason is that the scene reminds Zuko of how badly Ozai treated him. The puppet Ozai isn't being unreasonable when attacking an enemy soldier, but the real Ozai was exactly that when burning and banishing his son.

When Zuko went to watch puppet shows as a kid, he saw the 'Fire Lord' as his grandfather and had no ill will against the character. Now that he sees the puppet as Ozai, he can't help but to feel irrational

anger towards the character to the point where he is silently rooting for the 'evil earthbender' puppet, whom he himself has more in common with than he'd care to admit.

Despite what he thinks to himself, Zuko isn't really angry about what the 'Fire Lord' did on stage. He is angry for the things his father has done in real life, namely keeping up the war, raising Zuko to hate other nations and then banishing him at thirteen. He is also angry at himself for hating his own father because his hate further sets Zuko apart from his countrymen (who have no problem with the play) and proves that he is a traitor.

I hope that sort of explained what I was thinking. And now, back to action.

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****26. Mysterious Stranger****

"Aang", Sokka whispered angrily while untying the knots binding Katara to the chair, "What the hell did you do that for?"

"I... I didn't want Katara to get hurt..." Aang mumbled.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Sokka humphed, "It was a show. A performance. Did you really think that guy was going to let the dragon burn my sister? Come on."

Aang bit his lip. He knew Sokka was right.

I really screwed up.

It wasn't like Aang hadn't realized that they were watching a performance. On some level, he had known full well it was all just an act.

Still he hadn't been able to stop himself from reacting. Not when there was even the slightest chance that Katara might actually get hurt, and a risk of injury was always present when bending was involved.

An act or not, Aang didn't know enough about firebending or Fire Nation plays to know if there was a real risk that the stunt would fail. So he couldn't just stand idly by while Katara was potentially in some type of danger. He couldn't take that risk.

Enough people I care about have already died because I wasn't there to stop it.

"Hey, that's the Avatar", someone standing in the crowd pointed out.

"We better get going", Sokka suggested.

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Why is the Avatar here, in a Fire Nation colony, of all places? Does he secretly want to get caught?

Zuko sighed.

_Or maybe our destinies are just so intertwined that it gets a bit
ridiculous sometimes._

The Prince weighed his options.

The local security was sure to be swarming all over the Avatar and his gang as soon as they got their act together, so whatever he was going to do, he had to act quickly. Even though, knowing Aang and his friends, the trio wouldn't make capturing themselves too easy a task one way or the other.

The last thing I want is a big show down in the middle of the street. This is a family event. There are small children here. Even though no one here wants things to go explosive, they still might. Someone could get hurt.

Since the Prince had decided to protect Aang from being caught and the rest of the world from Aang, he couldn't do nothing when either or both options were terribly real threats. Doing nothing simply wasn't an option.

If I wish to help the Avatar to escape (again), I should put a mask on, Zuko decided.

Openly aiding an enemy of his nation on a public place wouldn't go unnoticed. Also, the Avatar would never _trust_ Prince Zuko to come to his aid.

The last time I tried to give Aang some advice on what to do, the airbender ran to the opposite direction than the one I had suggested. He doesn't trust me as far as he can throw me and I can hardly blame him for that. I haven't given him much reason to trust me. Well, at least not under my own name.

Come to think of it, Zuko had saved Aang or some other member of his team surprisingly many times, even before he'd decided not to capture the monk. The Prince had just hoarded so many secret aliases on the way that no one could guess it had been the same guy all along.

If they knew of all the help I've given them this might go a bit easier, Zuko sighed to himself, _Well, no point dwelling on that now._

Zuko moved and devised a plan simultaneously. After making sure everyone's eyes were on what was happening on the stage, Zuko slipped to the shadow of a near-by building and pulled out the mask.

The young man quickly covered his short hair with a scarf he always kept in his pocket, pulled gloves on his hands and put the opera mask on. He also removed his robe, knowing it would only get in the way.

Most of Zuko's clothes under the robe were dark shades of red, but that couldn't be helped right now. The main point was that he was wearing relatively non-descriptive clothes that covered every inch of his skin.

The only essential part of the Blue Spirit costume still missing was the Dao.

Didn't I see some sword fight performances when we toured around earlier? I wonder if those swords were real?

In potentially dangerous performances, people sometimes used deadly looking swords that were in fact made of a rubbery kind of material and were completely harmless.

While Zuko got changed, the crowd slowly caught onto what was going on. People were realizing that Aang's little stunt wasn't part of the performance and one or two people had already recognized the airbender.

Before Zuko had time to catch the Avatar's attention, a fight erupted in the area around the stage. The security had tried to come for the kids, which quickly resulted in a tangle of airbending, explosions and smoke. Even Zuko was having hard time keeping up who was doing what and to whom in the chaos.

Suddenly, a hooded person in the crowd waved and shouted for the Avatar to follow him. A cold sweat rose on Zuko's back.

No way I'm letting the Avatar run off with some mysterious stranger, Zuko felt a burst of irrational anger rise in his chest, _That guy could be a bounty hunter or working for Zhao or worse. The only mysterious stranger the Avatar is supposed run after is me._

Zuko couldn't waste another moment getting prepared, so he'd have to arm himself on the run.

Zuko whistled as loudly as he could and waved both of his arms at the monk, despite knowing how ridiculous he must've looked. Usually the Blue Spirit had more style, elegance and general intimidation factor than this, but the main point was that it worked.

Aang and his friends had already started to move towards the mystery man covering his face with a tattered scarf, but then the airbender noticed Zuko waving at them.

"Look! It's the Blue Spirit!" Aang shouted so loud that the entire clearing probably heard, "Let's go see what he wants."

"No, wait!" the scarfed man in rag-tag clothing sounded surprised and even worried, "I can take you to see a very important and awesome guy..."

To Zuko's delight, the other man's words had no effect. The Avatar was running straight for him.

"Sorry, buddy", Sokka said to the man, not sounding sorry at all, "But we'd rather take our chances with the mystery guy who helped us once already."

Okay, I've got the Avatar and his friends following me. Now all I have to do is figure out how to get us out of here without anyone getting hurt.

ooo

Iroh sipped his tea, briefly reminding himself to enjoy the little delights of life.

He didn't usually need to be reminded, but whenever he worried over Zuko, Uncle had a tendency to under-appreciate such things as comfortable cushions and the scent of fresh-brewed tea.

_Indeed, when all this is over, I've more than earned the right to dedicate my life to the simple pleasures in life. Some day, _Iroh mentally sighed.

It was actually a bit silly of him to worry over Zuko tonight.

Granted, his nephew could never be in a place so safe that trouble couldn't find him. Still, Zuko had recently broken free of his father, was in the process of putting his priorities straight and was now spending time in a friendly port. Most importantly, his nephew wasn't alone. What was the worst that could happen?

Iroh didn't dare to linger on that thought.

Instead he focused on the here-and-now and turned his attention back to the charming elderly lady sitting opposite to him.

All the customs and pleasantries a formal meeting of the White Lotus required had been handled. It was time to get down to business.

"I am so pleased that you found the time to see me at such a short notice", Iroh began.

Lady Shara gave a small bow: "The pleasure is all mine. It's been far too long."

Iroh smiled a warm smile as a response. It had, indeed, been a long time since they had met in person.

"Also, it is not often that our little branch of the Order gets to entertain the Grand Master himself", the Fire Nation woman added, half-serious, half-joking.

Shara was a high-ranking member of the Order, as was made apparent by the fact that she was one of the group's most trusted members and thus knew Iroh's true identity and ranking.

They were about the same age. Shara and Iroh had met years ago when they had both still been young and living in the capital. Although she came from a relatively minor house and he had at the time been the heir apparent, they had found many common interests.

Since then Iroh's military career and duties as the Crown Prince and Shara's interest in archeology had taken them to very different directions. However, after Iroh had gotten more active in White Lotus business at an older age, the two had reconnected, even if only through an occasional letter or two.

"To be quite frank", Shara continued, "I have been looking forward to this discussion. Your letter raised more questions than it answered."

Iroh nodded: "I understand how you feel. Unfortunately I won't probably be able to answer most of those questions since I'm at a bit of a loss myself."

Iroh and Lady Shara were alone in the small but cozy room located under a small shop. A decorative fireplace lit the entire room. To Iroh's delight, it also had a tea pot brewing in it.

If Iroh's intel was correct, Shara was not the only Lotus member currently residing in the vicinity. However she was the most likely to hold real answers, and she was the only one who had been invited to this meeting.

In other words, Jeong Jeong wasn't invited. Not that he would have probably show up even if he had been.

Although Jeong Jeong was a master firebender and a prestigious member of the White Lotus, he was also a rather paranoid man and, to be quite frank, a bit hard to get along with. Although the ex-admiral was an excellent military strategist and knew much of how the element of fire could be exploited in a battle, the Deserter was not well-acquainted with the historical roots of firebending.

He probably knew less about dragons than Iroh himself did. So sending out an invitation to him hadn't seemed worth the trouble.

"After receiving your letter, I have reread several scrolls and texts on the topic", Shara began, "As you are well aware, ever since I began my attempt at writing a comprehensive history of Fire Nation, my personal scroll collection has grown to a considerable extent."

Iroh nodded politely.

He could think of very few people with more knowledge on the official and unofficial points of view on their nation's history. It was her desire to uncover hidden truths that had lead her to immigrate to the Colonies to begin with. The farther you got from concentrations of political power, the freer you were to study even the not-so-preferred accounts of the past.

Iroh smiled his most disarming smile, "I certainly wouldn't mind getting to spent some time going over your findings in great detail. I dare wager even Wan Shi Tong would envy your collection. I'm not staying long, however, so for the time being I only have time to focus on the matter at hand."

"Yes", Shara agreed, "today you are here to learn more about the Dragon Warriors."

"Yes, I am! You have heard of them?" Iroh inquired. "I was unfamiliar with the term up until my nephew used it this morning."

Shara smiled a wry smile: "That does not surprise me. The Dragon Warriors, although apparently a significant part of our nation's ancient history, are mentioned in hardly any written texts or scrolls."

"Perhaps stories of them are so old they have gotten lost in the wheels of time. Or perhaps they have been purposefully destroyed

sometime in history, quite possibly during the great scroll burnings of the early years of Azulon's reign."

Shara's voice held a bitter edge as she was undoubtedly thinking of all the potentially priceless texts that Iroh's grandfather and father had ordered to be burned in order to manipulate their nation's self-image.

Clearing her throat, she continued: "I, however, have been fortunate enough to have travelled the archipelago quite a bit. During my travels I have heard many stories that have been passed down from generation to generation as part of our oral history. I have personally written down and added to my library stories that I doubt vast majority of even the better-educated citizens are acquainted with."

Her voice was clear and passionate. It was obvious she was an accustomed lecturer.

"Although at first I thought these so-called Dragon Warriors were just legends, after having come across similar descriptions in multiply sources I began to suspect there was a hint of truth to them."

"Your letter was very... eye-opening. It gave me a whole new perspective on Fire Nation myths that I had earlier considered dubious at best and rubbish at worst."

Iroh nodded. It was one thing to have heard of strange things and another to learn those things were real and happening even today.

"I can tell you everything I have uncovered, but I should like to first warn you that none of it is fact and some probably outright fiction. The tradition of oral storytelling is ambiguous. The stories have a tendency to change during the course of history when people's values gradually change and different details are given emphasis. Also, as people's way of thinking used to be more spiritual, even the original versions of the stories were probably heavily laced with mythical aspects."

"I can tell you which parts I suspect are most likely to be true and which are only mentioned in one or two descriptions, but I cannot guarantee the accuracy of any of it."

"I understand", Iroh said, eager to hear more but reluctant to rush the woman. As an academic figure, Shara was used to approaching a research question from a thorough and critical perspective and to lay her case well, which Iroh did not have a problem with.

"First, however", Shara looked Uncle levelly in the eye, "I would be most curious to hear how you came across this topic. Your letter implied you had met a Dragon Warrior and that he or she has only recently acquired this ability."

"If you don't mind me asking, who is it?" the woman asked. Her tone was even but her eyes were burning with curiosity.

Uncle took a deep breath: "I'm sorry if you were offended that I didn't mention the identity of the Warrior in my letter. The information is of such delicate nature that I dared not write it

down, not even in an encrypted message. But yes, I know one of these Dragon Warriors very closely. It's my nephew."

Shara's eyes widened with surprise: "Your nephew? As in Prince Zuko, the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation?"

Iroh nodded: "The only nephew I have."

The woman looked uncharacteristically taken aback. Iroh sipped some more tea, giving Shara time to process the new information.

Revealing Zuko's big secret was starting to become a bad habit but, once again, Uncle was sure that it would be safe from Zuko's enemies. The Order of White Lotus could keep a secret.

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Zuko ran towards an alley leading away from the main square. He was determined to lead the Avatar away from the crowd of people before more security arrived.

Two guards tried to block his way, but they weren't benders. Zuko didn't need his swords to take them down.

The masked man grabbed a spear from the other man's hand and swept them both off their feet. He had cleared their way before the Avatar had time to catch up, which was good. Zuko had seen Aang in action and could imagine the kind of painfully large gushes of wind the boy would've used to down his enemies.

The Prince had, after all, only few weeks ago been one of those enemies who got tossed around like autumn leaves.

Peaceful Air Nomads, Zuko humphed inertly. _They must have thought themselves quite the __philanthropist using only attacks that were harmless when used against other airbenders who could land safely from any blow._

_It must have been very different to be raised in an environment where _all_ could bend._

Zuko waved for the trio to follow him as he ran down the alley.

I need to lead them out of the city, but if we keep drawing this much attention to our presence, we are likely to encounter a massive amount of resistance on the way. Rather than pushing through the entire town with sheer force, I should stick to my ninja training. I should be sneaky about this.

Zuko ran down a few more streets and alleys before he found what he was looking for.

"Where are we going?" Sokka asked when he saw that Zuko had stopped and was looking around.

Zuko climbed on top a wooden wall over the height of a full grown man and gestured for the others to follow him.

The Water Tribe kids looked dubious, but the Avatar jumped right next

to him, shouting: "It's okay. He's here to help us get away. We can trust him."

Zuko waved for them to hurry. It was only a matter of time before someone came looking for them, and confusing your trackers didn't work if you were constantly within their line of sight.

Zuko offered Sokka a hand while Aang helped Katara. In no time all four were on the other side of the wall. They had arrived in a small courtyard which was thankfully completely devoid of people.

"Aang, I know you trust the Blue Spirit because he saved you from Zhao, but how can you be sure that this is the same guy?" Sokka whispered to his friends rather loudly, "He is wearing a mask."

Zuko gestured for them to keep their heads down and stay quiet.

Aang whispered back: "It's him. Trust me. I'd know the way he moves anywhere."

The Air Nomad gave him a wide smile. Zuko had a bad feeling Aang was referring to more than just the Prince's uncanny ninja skills, but he couldn't contradict the boy without opening his mouth and saying so. The kids would recognize his voice in a heart beat, and then they would certainly stop following his lead. So Zuko kept quiet.

The Prince tried to feel around himself with his firebending. Searching for sources of inner and actual fires was one of the rare skills the Order of Shadows taught, but Zuko had never been exceptionally good at it. Still, it was worth a shot to quickly scan his surroundings.

Zuko reached out with his chi, trying to feel for sources of heat in the vicinity, especially within the four two-story buildings around the fenced yard. After he was relatively sure that he couldn't sense any fires, actual or inner, in the building closest to them, Zuko took out a knife.

Again, lock picking wasn't one of his greatest assets, but thankfully the door gave way easily enough.

"We are", Sokka whispered, "Breaking into a Fire Nation home? Sweet! Why didn't I think of that?"

After everyone was inside, Zuko closed the door quietly. He could hear shouts and steps from the street, but nothing suggested their pursuers knew where they had gone.

The room was dark but Zuko couldn't use his firebending to light it without loosing at least some of the trust the kids had carelessly thrust upon him.

Wow, they really do trust in the kindness of strangers, don't they? They were completely ready to run after that other mystery man without any idea who he was or if he meant them well._

It wasn't a new revelation, but Zuko still had a hard time wrapping his head around the concept.

Trust. Given freely. Huh.

What would have happened if, on their first meeting, Zuko had kindly asked for Aang to come with him so that they could have a talk over a cup of tea?

Probably the exact same thing that happened anyway, Zuko quickly decided.

The kids trusted strangers without reservations, but Zuko doubted the trust extended to anyone wearing a Fire Navy uniform. Or people from Fire Nation in general.

"Find them!" a shout came from the street, "They can't have gotten far!"

Zuko's eyes had adjusted enough to his surroundings that he could make out a ladder leading to the second floor. He poked at the Water Tribe boy and pointed at the ladder.

"I think your creepy quiet friend wants us to go up there", Sokka whispered to the others.

Aang's mask had fallen off during his flashy attempt at rescue, and Sokka and Katara, too, had dropped their masks sometime during their escape, so Zuko was the last one in the bunch still hiding his face.

Zuko could make out Katara's expression as the girl nodded at his brother, looking determined.

Zuko went up first. After two sets of ladders and a hatch they had reached the attic. As Zuko had hoped, there was a small window at the end of the building. It gave in some light.

The people who lived in the house used this dusty, non-heated space for storage. It was somewhat cramped with miscellaneous stuff. There wasn't enough room to stand up straight without hitting your head on the ceiling.

The Water Tribe kids and the Avatar snuck to the window, careful not to hit their heads on wooden roof beams on the way. Zuko closed the hatch after them and then followed the others to see what was going on on the street below.

They couldn't stay there forever, but this was still a considerably better plan than running around aimlessly. Now that they had found a sound hiding spot, Zuko could properly plan their escape.

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"The Prince of Fire Nation is a Dragon Warrior. That certainly puts things in perspective", the woman dressed in traditional Fire Nation colors finally managed, "And how sure are you of this? Have you personally witnessed one of these... transformations you described in your letter?"

"Twice", Uncle answered shortly, subtly urging her to go on. Shara immediately got the hint.

"Yes, back to the point. According to a legend I came across during my travels at the Kuijil Islands, ever since humans learned bending from their respective spiritual animals, a connection has remained between humans and said animals."

"Since my knowledge is limited to Fire Nation history, I do not know if similar believes of special connections are common among the other elements. That is something that would require more looking into."

"What I do know is that in Fire Nation culture this connection was believed to manifest in several different and often quite concrete ways. Some humans were said to have possessed dragon-like features such as unique firebending capabilities and even mindreading, which dragons supposedly used as a method of communication."

"I have a strong reason to believe, that at least the mindreading part has roots in reality", Iroh pitched in. Shara looked curious but the old man added nothing more on where he'd come across such evidence.

Although information on the Order of Shadows would've certainly intrigued his White Lotus buddies, Iroh hadn't felt right retelling too much about the monastery's business to them. Zuko had told those things to his uncle in confidence, after all, and Zuko's trust wasn't easily regained.

So Iroh just smiled and sipped more tea.

Shara eventually shrugged and moved on: "Very well. Mindreading sounds like something that shouldn't be possible, but I guess it's no more unbelievable than the rest of it."

Shara returned to her lecture: "The most noticeable way this connection would showcase was when an individual was chosen by the spirits to become a Dragon Warrior. The stories of what this precisely means vary, but they all describe it as both a physical and a spiritual journey."

"Of course, you already knew this much from first-hand experience", the woman smiled at Iroh briefly.

Uncle nodded, stroking his beard: "Indeed, though being on a journey is nothing new to Zuko. Despite his young age, my nephew has been through much. So much in fact that I don't believe he himself considers his new role as a Dragon Warrior too big a problem."

Not in comparison to the other problems and complications still shadowing Zuko's life.

"Nor should he", Shara said earnestly, "I can't claim to understand what it must be like for him but what I do know is history. In stories the consensus is that the task of a Dragon Warrior, although never easy and often plain ungrateful, is not a problem or a punishment. It's not even really described as a change in a person but rather as a fulfillment of, well, in lack of better terms, his or her _destiny_."

Iroh nodded. He had never doubted that his nephew had a great destiny instore for him. Still, sometimes Uncle couldn't help but to wish the

spirits meddling with his nephew's life would give him more time to find his way before thrusting any more destiny-altering events on his path.

"The role of the Dragon Warriors varies between legends", Shara lectured on, "In few of them Dragon Warriors are briefly mentioned as a type of scary monsters, but more often they are considered respected and powerful creatures, even heroes."

"The usual indicators that a character is a Dragon Warrior are that the person is dragon-like in behavior, that he or she can communicate with dragons and that the warrior can take on the shape and powers of a dragon."

"Dragon Warriors were sometimes referred to as the Spirit Chosen, which tells us much of the supposed origin of their powers. According to a myth, these individuals were born to be Dragon Warriors, but this was only realized after they were touched by spirits, and only if they chose to accept the spirits' gift."

"My nephew said the same thing, although from his description I got the impression that the spirit wasn't very explicit on the terms of their agreement", Iroh said, "However, Zuko also emphasized that he wasn't tricked into something, nor was the change involuntary. He said he could've chosen differently."

Shara nodded: "Although a choice appears to be an important part of each story featuring a Dragon Warrior as a hero, I'm not sure how seeming this choice is. There are no existing stories of people who chose not to become Dragon Warriors. It doesn't mean this never happened, only that nothing happening wasn't the kind of news that lived through centuries."

"The supposed deeds of Dragon Warriors vary almost as much as descriptions of them. There doesn't appear to be a single logical pattern to them. The Spirit Chosen are emphasized as individuals who fought for many different things depending on what their individual hopes and beliefs were."

"I suspect the spirits didn't choose these people at random, though. You know more about spirits than I do, but even I know that they usually have a hidden agenda."

Iroh nodded: "They have their own objectives, although 'hidden' might not be the right word. Most spirits aren't making a conscious effort to confuse us mortals. Their mindset is just so different from ours that we do not recognize any logic behind their actions."

"And I understand this confusion works both ways, yes?" Shara asked.

"Yes. Most spirits care nothing for what's best for humans", Iroh confirmed, "But even if they notice something is out of place in our world and choose to do something about it, they often end up making matters worse rather than better. Spirits don't understand humans any more than we them."

"Perhaps that is why they chose humans to be their representatives?" Shara lead the conversation on.

"Are you saying that you suspect my nephew was chosen to carry out a task for a spirit?" Iroh asked seriously.

"No, I wouldn't say that" Shara answered, equally serious, "But I do have a theory on the matter."

"Like you said, spirits could use some help in dealing with people", Shara lectured on, "That is why we have the Avatar institution: someone who understands both sides and acts as a mediator between humans and spirits. However, since there is only one Avatar, all nations also have people such as our Fire Sages who help ordinary people deal with spiritual matters."

"You think Dragon Warriors are meant to act as sages?" Uncle was puzzled.

"I believe there's more to it. In many stories, the Spirit Chosen are said to have been better at dealing with spirits and dragons alike than ordinary humans were, so acting as a sage was perhaps a part of their job, but I highly doubt it was their primary one."

"Dragon Warriors had a much more active role in shaping the world than just that of a messenger or an interpreter", Shara explained, "You have to understand, in legends they always had a destiny with a capital D. Whether they chose to do good or bad, their choices always had a major impact on the world."

"It is possible that the old Dragon Spirit chose your nephew in the hopes that he would be inclined to do something she wanted done. However, humans always have a free will, no matter what. If a spirit just wanted a task completed, wouldn't she rather do it herself?" Shara looked at Iroh quizzically, obviously about to answer her own question, so Iroh said nothing.

Shara smiled: "My theory is that Dragon Warriors weren't chosen to fulfill spirits' wishes. Perhaps some spirits wanted a change but also realized that they didn't understand humans well enough to be able to make that change happen."

"So instead they picked a being of fire for the job. Fire is many things but peaceful it's not. When spirits chose a firebender to represent them, perhaps they did this because they knew that whatever their chosen would do, a radical change would be the outcome."

"The spirits do not always make their hopes or intentions directly known. Humans have to figure those out on their own or risk breaking them and angering the spirits. But perhaps doing something is all that the spirits want of Dragon warriors. They want to stir things up a bit in the mortal world and the rest is left up to the chosen individual's judgment."

Uncle thought that over in his head: "You might be onto something. Spirits have always taken a special interest in my nephew, of this I'm sure. Even long before they directly influenced Zuko's life, they have constantly pushed him towards unlikely confrontations that have forced him to make decisions that effect the world."

We do keep running into the Avatar in the oddest places, even when we're not looking for him. And Zuko just happened to find the Order of Shadows, the only people in the world who could teach him how to

use the Power of Dragons._

Iroh did not believe in coincidences.

"But.. you suggest that my nephew is still free to chose to do whatever he wants without a fear of angering the spirit that gave him this gift?" Iroh asked.

"Bending, too, is a gift from the spirits" Shara pointed out, "Yet bending does not come with a code of conduct."

"Let's say the Dragon Spirit wants Zuko to change the world. I don't think she cares what Zuko does with his powers. If he tries to rebuild the world, that is all well and nice. If he chooses to oppress and destroy? New growth will rise from the ashes, nonetheless. Spirits don't really care about collateral damage much."

Uncle nodded.

As disturbing as it was that the spirits had decided to use his nephew in their plans, things didn't appear to be as hopeless as he had feared. Zuko had, after all, always been in a position to either inflict great good or great evil in the world. It was a part of his heritage as the great-grandson of both, Fire Lord Sozin and Avatar Roku.

Shara was absently tracing the painted patters of her tea cup with her fingers

"In the stories, Dragon Warriors could even go against the spirits", Shara said quietly, waking Iroh from his deep thoughts.

"Go against the spirits?" Iroh was taken aback. It sounded to him like a very bad idea, but also something his nephew might be foolish enough to do: "What were the consequences for such behavior?"

"Milder than in other stories", Shara tried to comfort him, "In legends in general, going against spirits ends badly. However, it appears that Dragons Warriors were able to get away with it. The spirits do not understand humans. Thus they expected the Spirit Chosen to use their own judgment on matters. In essence, rebelling was almost encouraged."

"Fire isn't exactly known as the most... harmonious element, "Uncle mused, his hand stroking his beard, "Figures we would contradict even our own spirits."

ooo

"I'd hate to say 'I told you so' but I'm going to say it anyway", the Water Tribe boy whispered to his companions, "So that the next time you two suggest a ridiculously risky plan in the name of trying to get to know our enemy's culture a bit better, you can think back on this moment and remember that Sokka was right."

The kids started to quietly argue amongst themselves. Zuko tuned out most of the conversation in order keep his attention on planning, but still he couldn't help but to feel a little surprised by what he was

hearing.

_They came to the Fire Festival to... learn more about Fire Nation culture? Wow, not in a million years would have I guessed that. And here I thought they didn't even know that Fire Nation _has_ a culture, but rather thought we were a solely militaristic society._

For once, Zuko was happy to be proven wrong.

Maybe, there is still hope for a future in which both the world and the Fire Nation live and flourish...

The Avatar's reason for coming here was so consoling that it almost made up for his idiotic behavior earlier. Almost.

"Look", Katara pointed down at the street, "They're knocking on doors and breaking them if no one answers."

Zuko had noticed that as well. People didn't just disappear into thin air and the guards knew that, so they had started to search the near-by houses.

Good thing was that by now Zuko had a plan. All he had to do was relay it to his... the others.

Zuko tapped each of the kids on shoulder to get their attention. Then he pointed each of them in turn with his finger and then he gestured towards the floor that they were all crouched on.

"You... want us to go back downstairs?" Aang asked.

Zuko rolled his eyes despite knowing that the kids wouldn't be able to see his gesture behind the mask. The Prince shook his head and then repeated the waving, gesturing for the kids to stay here. Hopefully they understood.

Then Zuko pointed at himself and then out the window. Surely the concept of sending one out to act as a decoy wasn't completely unfamiliar to these people.

"No, don't go!" Aang said a bit too loudly, "We have so much to talk about. Like, which temple you're from and what is your favorite game and..."

Zuko shook his head vigorously. That bubble needed some serious bursting as soon as possible.

"Aang, I don't think he's in a talkative mood", Sokka pointed out, "Plus, we need to focus on getting out of here."

Zuko could've hugged the Water Tribe boy for keeping his head in the game. For now, he settled for nodding.

"Aang", Katara took the monk's hand into hers, "I don't think he's an airbender."

"Of course he..." The Avatar started before he noticed Zuko pointing at Katara and nodding his head emphatically.

What she said.

"But", the look on Aang's face was so sad that Zuko almost regretted telling him the truth, "You all saw how he _moves_ and..."

"Katara is right", Sokka wrapped his arm around the younger boy's shoulders, "He is really light on his feet but he hasn't used any _airbending_, whereas you use airbending all the time. You don't walk or run or even sit down without using your bending."

"I... I know that. I can see that. But I think he's just careful. He doesn't want people to know he's an airbender. He's wearing a mask..."

Zuko took advantage of the fact that everyone's attention was on consoling Aang and quietly pushed the window open. No one on the street was looking their way and Zuko didn't want to waste such an opportunity.

Also, The Prince didn't feel right intruding on the children's private moment like this. No matter who or what they thought he was, in reality he wasn't their friend.

"But he used airbending in Pohuai Stronghold. Once. Maybe. It was an airbending kata. I was so sure..."

_An airbending kata? _That was... possible.

Master Kurita had said that the teachings of the Order of Shadows were directly derived from the Air Nomads. Ninjutsu wasn't airbending, but they had common roots. Both were evasive and fast.

Zuko was now starting to see how it was possible that the boy had mistaken him for an airbender.

_Still, you'd think an airbending _master_ would know the difference between real and fake airbending..._

_Fake airbending? Is that what I was doing back in Pohuai? _

_I mean, I _never_ firebend when I'm the Blue Spirit. I'm careful not to. Sometimes I use the Power of Dragons, but that's different. There are no flames involved._

...Using firebending without creating visible flames? Is that what I did?

Zuko would need to look into that. Later.

The masked teenager swiftly climbed out of the window and hurled himself to the roof before anyone on the street saw him. Silent as the night he took a few steps for speed and jumped across the street, landing on the building directly facing their hiding place.

He though he heard something like a quiet 'come back', but didn't turn to look. Instead he ran across the roof and jumped down to another street some distance from their hiding spot.

Zuko landed on the ground unnoticed, a state of affairs he was

determined to change.

ooo

"An airbender or not, that kid is _fast_", Sokka pointed out, trying to lighten the mood in the attic.

Actually, he didn't know how old their mystery friend was, but from his size Sokka had guessed he wasn't an adult. He might be a teenager. Or maybe he was just short and wiry.

The masked man had jumped on the ground and then created a magnificent amount of noise by banging his knife on a metallic water tank. Now every Fire Nation soldier within a mile radius was busy chasing after him.

"He's in trouble", Aang said, "We have to go help..."

"Aang, I'm pretty sure this is part of the plan", Katara pointed out.

"Yeah, and if he really took on an entire stronghold by himself, this is probably nothing he couldn't handle", Sokka couldn't quite hide in his voice just how _impressed_ he was by this guy.

A non-bender who could take down people lightning fast with his hands alone. Aang had said he was even better with swords, but still, to take on an entire enemy stronghold by himself? This guy had a fearless attitude, Sokka had to give him that.

It must've taken years of training to get that good.

Impressed or not, Sokka still wasn't quite sure whether they should trust the guy. Granted, he hadn't given them any reason not to trust him. Yet.

"Why is he wearing a mask? And most importantly, why doesn't he _say_ anything?" Sokka looked to Aang and Katara, "I mean, I get that he doesn't want the Fire Nation to know who he is. We saw his wanted posture and that's a lot of money they've got promised for his head. But why is he so eager to keep his identity a secret from _us,_ too? What is he hiding?"

_Unless... no. He couldn't be. But... we do keep running into him in _Fire Nation_ outposts..._

No way. The Blue Spirit is not from Fire Nation. He's just following us. Or he's here to harass the Fire Nation or something...

Still, Sokka couldn't quite shake of the feeling that something strange was going on. Things just didn't add up.

"I don't know why he isn't talking, but I think that's just something he does. He only said one word the last time we met. Still, I wouldn't have gotten out without his help", Aang was surprisingly determined on the matter, "He's a friend, and we should go after him."

"How?" Katara asked.

"Of course!" Sokka slapped himself on the face, "I almost forgot."

Sokka might not be quite the fighter the Blue Spirit was, but he was determined not to be completely useless. Now he dug into his pocket, pulled out a wooden whistle and blew on it.

ooo

"You keep mentioning that, as a rule, Dragon Warriors had a great impact on the world. Care to elaborate?" Iroh inquired. "I mean, all beings wish to leave their mark on the world, but most do not have the power to act upon that wish. Due to his rank, Zuko has always been in a position to shape the world more than most. However, I fail to see how becoming a Dragon Warrior has increased his chances of doing so."

"Since his transformation, my nephew's skill level has increased slightly, his behavior has undergone some changes (though not only due to his spiritual encounters) and there is of course the occasional transformation into a dragon. None of these changes suddenly make him a force to be reckoned with. His powers are nowhere near on the same level as those of, let's say, the Avatar's."

Lady Shara thought that over before answering: "According to my understanding, Dragon Warriors are potentially powerful benders, but just like everyone else, they have to train hard to become all they can be."

Shara herself wasn't a bender, but that didn't mean she hadn't always taken a special interest in martial arts. Consequently, she knew a considerable deal about fighting, with or without bending.

Still, her weapon of choice was undoubtedly the brush. Words could be more dangerous than knives when used skillfully.

"So", Iroh put in, "You suspect that we have yet to see all that my nephew has become."

Shara nodded: "Some changes can only be seen in time. Others will turn up only if Zuko becomes aware of them and hones them accordingly."

"What kind of changes should I be looking out for?" Iroh sounded old, but still as determinant as ever.

"Well, a special connection to spirits is a power by itself, and not one to be taken lightly. Unfortunately, without personal experience on the subject, I can hardly give specific advice on how to deal with visitors from the Spirit Realm. Still, I'd say having you as an uncle is a considerable asset", Shara gave Iroh a smile.

Everyone who was anyone in Fire Nation had heard of Iroh's journey to the Spirit World.

Iroh nodded: "There is certainly no single right way to approach a spirit. It all depends on the spirit, the occasion and numerous other variables. Thank you for the warning, nonetheless, although it comes a bit late. This side to being a Dragon Warrior has already made itself evident."

"By which you mean...?" Shara inquired.

"At least one spirit, Nakki, already sought Zuko out. I wouldn't call the trickster spirit a reliable source of information, but it strongly implied that it wasn't the only one who had taken interest in my nephew."

"That's... surprising", Shara said.

"Yes, it is", Iroh agreed, "Spirits don't normally take interest before-hand. They usually act only after someone has wronged them. Even then, they don't often specify their revenge on certain individuals."

"However, the river spirit made it clear that we had done nothing to offend it, nor were we anywhere near its natural habitat. Still, the shapeshifter not only came to see my nephew but also sabotaged his ship."

"That's odd", Shara furrowed her brows, "Why would a spirit specialized in trickery take such a direct approach? It isn't one of the Great Ones. Taking down an entire war ship is a bit out of its league. Why would it take on such an undertaking for no apparent reason?"

Iroh weighed his words before answering: "First off, I must point out that sinking our ship wasn't the waterspirit's end game. I suspect it was testing us. As to why, I can only begin to guess."

"It is possible Nakki was doing somebody else's bidding. However, since that encounter I've looked up some history on the said spirit, and it isn't known for allying itself with other spirits."

"All in all, Nakki has been rather active in our world, especially for a waterspirit. It is mentioned in surprisingly many stories even of late. Also, considering the type of spirit we are talking about here, it has undoubtedly done more than it has been caught doing."

"So... You think the spirit was just being exceptionally active. That it was just testing the ice to get a feel of a possible future threat", Shara pondered.

"That would be the best case scenario. Still, even if Nakki isn't actively plotting against my nephew, doesn't mean no spirit is", Iroh said matter-of-factly.

"So", Iroh smiled a bit, "Anything else?"

"Longevity", Shara said shortly, "That is something children of fire have always had. Fire Lord Sozin lived to be over hundred and fifty. Although that is very old for a human, but not for a dragon."

Iroh's eyes widened.

"Dragon Warriors aren't famous for living to be old", Shara explained, "But that's because most of them didn't die of old age. However, even a cautious estimate suggests that those who didn't go down fighting, lived for hundreds of years. Some stories even imply

that since Dragon Warriors could take on the appearance of a dragon for an indefinite amount of time, it is possible some of them lived even long after all records of their existence cease."

"Are you saying", Iroh gulped, "my nephew could live to be as old as dragons?"

Shara shook her head: "I doubt any human could live for _thousands_ of years. That would've have been mentioned, surely. Still, Zuko could potentially outlive all his ancestors. He might also age differently from other humans."

"Fire Lord Kenzin, for example, was said to have looked like a young man even at the age of fifty. There is no historical proof that he was a Dragon Warrior, but he would certainly fit the part, so I wouldn't rule it out."

Iroh nodded: "You said that Dragon Warriors could turn into a dragon whenever they wanted for as long as they wanted. Then they must have had control over this change. However, my nephew said turning into a dragon isn't a conscious choice for him, but just something that happens when he's exceptionally upset. Do you know how Zuko could gain more control over his transformations?"

"Uh, well, I hadn't actually thought about that." Shara looked mildly desperate to come up with an answer. "In the stories the ability to turn into a dragon at will is a given, so it stands to presume Prince Zuko can learn to fully control his transformation. The 'how' is anybody's guess. Maybe it's one of those things that you can only become better at with practice."

"Learning through experience", Iroh sighed, "That my temperamental nephew has always had to do."

"Is that a bad thing?" Shara asked.

"Not exactly", Iroh answered and then elaborated, "Zuko has made many mistakes, but the main point is that he has learned from them."

"But, as an old proverb goes: 'By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the most bitter'. Needless to say my nephew tends to favor the latter", Iroh smiled a wry smile.

"You shouldn't be too hard on him", Shara smiled a genuine smile back at the old General, "The way I remember it, you weren't much wiser than he is when you were his age."

"That's true", Iroh allowed, "I just wish that Zuko would make his own life easier by learning to think before he acts. Though I have to say", Iroh added in a lighter tone, "He's made considerable headway on that topic of late."

Shara nodded and asked. "You said you had already noticed some changes in your nephew. Can you elaborate on those?"

"Well", Iroh said thoughtfully, "My nephew has always been a temperamental and willful young man, but after his change, he has

become a bit more... controlled. Admittedly, that could be related to other changes he's been going through at the same time."

"However, although Zuko is more in control of himself, he's become no less intimidating to the people around him. I suspect humans can instinctively sense the dragon in him."

"That would fit the descriptions", Shara allowed.

Iroh went on: "I haven't really had a good change to observe how being a Dragon Warrior has affected my nephew's firebending, but I highly suspect it has increased in power. His firebending style has always been exceptionally smooth, and that characteristic appears to have strengthened as well."

"That's interesting", Shara put in, "To me, it sounds perfectly plausible, even logical, that turning into an original firebender would enhance one's firebending. Whether that's for better or for worse, I'm not sure, though."

Iroh furrowed his brows: "What do you mean?"

"Being exceptionally tuned to one's element makes one a powerful bender, but if this is done at the expense of the other elements, the said individual might become unbalanced in personality. The real question is whether only the fire part of him has increased or whether he's become stronger as a whole", Shara explained.

"I see your point, and I believe I already know the answer to your question", Uncle mused, "After his transformation, my nephew has become less driven. I found it oddly controversial considering that he is supposed to be more tuned to his element and ambition and determination are considered traits of fire."

"I suspected that this was because dragons are children of air as well as fire, and becoming a dragon has made Zuko more air. However, it makes even more sense that all his weaker elements, air, water and earth, have become more prominent to compensate for the extra amount of fire."

"I hope you are right", Shara said seriously, but added in a lighter tone, "Though you probably are. In stories, Dragon Warriors are described terrifying but not outright hostile. They are said to be fair and even spiritually aware. Sun Warriors called them 'something every firebender should aim to be like'."

"So, they aren't generally described to be maniacs. Even if some of them were unbalanced, it doesn't appear to have been direct result of them being Spirit Chosen."

"I have some... knowledge on the Sun Warriors", Iroh began, "And they do... did indeed believe that dragons were more balanced than human firebenders are. They said this wasn't due to the fact that firebending isn't fit for humans but rather because we have grown too far from the original ideals of fire and have thus forgotten the true essence of firebending. According to them, this is why so many human firebenders misuse their power."

Shara smiled: "Someone should tell that to Jeong Jeong."

"You... don't get along?" Iroh guessed.

"Well, I've only met him once. I wanted to have his personal point of view on Fire Nation's recent war history", Shara explained, "I figured he had a unique perspective on the topic. And that it certainly was."

"Still, it is difficult to have a meaningful conversation with a person who sees fire as a solely destructive force bordering on evil and stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the possibility that he could be wrong."

Iroh smiled in sympathy. He had met Jeong Jeong, too. It was before he became the Deserter, but even at the time it had been plainly evident that the man respected the other elements to the point where he had no respect for his own.

"We are all entitled to our opinions", Iroh said soothingly. It was true. The Order of White Lotus took in anyone who sought to talk and learn more of history and philosophy, regardless of which nation they were from or how actively they were participating in the war.

"My point exactly", Shara huffed, "Another thing you ought to tell Jeong Jeong or, better yet, his followers."

Shara looked down at her nearly untouched cup of tea. When she looked up there was a smile on her face again: "I believe I've led our conversation a stray. So, back on the topic: perhaps your theory of dragons being part air is true, after all. Perhaps creatures with the ability to fly are bound to be stronger in other elements than just fire."

"Air appears a rather obvious trait for a Dragon Warrior, and not just because dragons can fly. Air is the element of spirit, and although dragons aren't known for being spiritual, Dragon Warriors are known for exactly that."

Iroh was about to say something more but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Shara's voice sounded casual but her body language made it clear that she hadn't been expecting an interruption.

"No flower can bloom for a hundred years", a voice Iroh didn't know said through the door.

Shara went to the door and unbolted it.

In stepped a man in his twenties. The young man bowed to Shara and Iroh and they bowed back. No further introductions were made.

The young man spoke in an even tone: "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought it prudent to let you know that something is happening in the town. A fight erupted in the Fire Festival awhile ago, but it ended quickly. However, now there is a city-wide search underway to capture the culprits. It is unlikely that the guards will come looking here, but it might still be wise to continue this meeting at another time."

"I believe we were just about done", Shara looked Iroh levelly, "If

it's fine by you, we could move on to a more informal location to continue catching up."

"Yes, we are probably done. Once again, thank you for your time. The things we've discussed here will surely be of use to me", Iroh replied politely.

Then the old man turned to address the new-comer: "And about this commotion... You don't happen to know who it is that they are looking for?"

A fight at the Fire Festival? Uncle had an unnerving feeling that Zuko was somehow involved.

"People are saying that it was the Avatar who started the fight. Though some say it was the masked vigilantly known as the Blue Spirit. The soldiers are looking for both."

Iroh took in a very deep breath.

Why do I bother asking?

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"I'm not sure if he wants us to go back for him", Sokka commented, "Surely he would have said or _waved_ something about it if the plan was for us to go get him."

"No, Sokka", Aang said determinately and pulled at Appa's reigns, "I'm not leaving him behind _this time_!"

Ignoring the few firebolts that the soldiers below were throwing their way, Aang guided Appa back towards the center of the town. He didn't care how well the Blue Spirit could supposedly take care of himself. When you were working in a team, you didn't leave people behind.

Luckily, it wasn't difficult to pin-point their new friend from the bird perspective. The masked man himself was but a dark flash against the roof tiles, but the twenty or so firebenders running behind him gave his position away easily enough.

"Yep, yep", Aang urged his animal companion to go faster.

For some reason, Appa was reluctant to comply.

"C'mon, Appa. The Blue Spirit needs our help."

"Mphrrrr", Appa crumpled but made no move to go any closer to the fight.

"I know you don't like going near fire but we'll be in and out before you know it", Aang assured his bison, finally getting Appa to descend.

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_What are they _doing_? Why are they still _here_?_

Zuko dodged a firebolt by leaping to one side and then returned to

running flat, jumping from a rooftop to the next.

_They are not... _Surely_ they didn't come back for _me_. _

In what reality was that ever part of the plan? was all Zuko had time to think before Aang shouted: "Don't worry, we'll rescue you!", effectively proving Zuko's doubts right.

Zuko waved vigorously at the Avatar, attempting to communicate that he didn't want to be rescued and that they should leave without him.

Stubbornly, Aang guided Appa closer to the fight, waving at Zuko to jump on board.

Now what? If Zuko went with the Avatar, they might figure out who he was and things could get... complicated.

On the other hand, they apparently weren't leaving without him.

Sighing to himself, Zuko hauled himself atop the bison, much to the animal's dismay.

_Well I guess _one_ of you remembers that I am not your friend. Or can smell the dragon on me._

Dodging firebolts, Aang swiftly guided the animal up and towards the thick forests.

Zuko took a moment to catch his breath, before turning to face the others. As the lights of the Colony grew distant, it occurred to Zuko that he had essentially been kidnapped by the Avatar.

Great. Now what?

"Whoa, that was close", Aang commented and turned to look at the three youngsters sitting in the saddle.

The Water Tribe kids said nothing. Everyone's eyes were on Zuko, waiting for him to say something.

Zuko briefly wondered what would happen if he took off his mask and casually replied 'You can say that again'.

It all really boiled down to if they would try to talk to him before Katara waterbent him off the bison.

Well, the treetops really weren't _that_ far below them. Zuko could probably take the fall.

They think I'm a monster, and I've given them little reason to think otherwise. Even if they would stop long enough to hear me out, what could I say to them that would convince them that this isn't all part of some elaborate plot to capture the Avatar?

I guess I could try to tell them that I'm no longer their enemy, but... that would be lying.

If it ever came down to a choice between the Avatar and his nation,

which was not at all an unlikely scenario, Zuko would side with his people. In a heartbeat. No questions asked.

Zuko had let the Avatar go for now because the Prince had serious doubts about the righteousness of the war. The world needed someone to put an end to all the killing.

But... if Aang ever truly became a threat to the safety of his people, Zuko would use _any means necessary_ to stop him. He'd do everything in his power to capture the boy.

And that wasn't something friends did to each other.

Or... was it?

"Now that we are all safe and among friends, we can relax a bit", Sokka said seemingly to everyone, but the words were obviously meant for Zuko.

Zuko felt irritated and confused. This was not what he had agreed on.

The plan had been to get the Avatar out of the Colony without any casualties. Mission accomplished. What more did these people want from him?

Zuko sighed out loud.

Hadn't he just today thought to himself that protecting the Avatar from Zhao and other idiots would go a lot easier if the monk knew Zuko wasn't trying to capture him any more?

What was the worst that could happen if he took his mask off right here and now and somehow convinced them that he was on their side?

Yeah, that _was_ the worst possible outcome. Because then, when Zuko would eventually have to defeat Aang to protect his people, they would feel hurt and betrayed that he had turned against them.

Fulfilling his duty and stopping the Avatar would be easier if the Air Nomad and his friends thought of him as nothing more than a one more enemy. That way Zuko couldn't let them down. He wouldn't have to make promises he couldn't keep.

Zuko shook his head. What was he _thinking_? He couldn't actually be considering _any_ of this. The situation was in fact very simple.

_This is war, and _we_ are _not_ on the same side. _

Facing problems head on was how Prince Zuko went about his life.

The Blue Spirit, on the other hand... he was elusive. He was air. He showed up out of nowhere and vanished into thin air when he was done.

Neither Zuko nor the Blue Spirit were known for asking for permission to leave. Especially not when they were surrounded by enemies.

From the corner of his eye Zuko saw something glisten in the moonlight. He saw that his time had come. He would make the most of it.

The teenager grabbed the side of the saddle and jumped over it. His short fall ended in a wide, muddy river they had been flying over. The water was warmer than he had expected.

Zuko surfaced and swam to the river bank as fast as he could. As he had feared, the Avatar had turned his bison around and was coming back towards the river.

Zuko climbed out of the water and ran for the forest, quickly finding a good hiding spot in the lush undergrowth.

Running from your problems didn't solve them, but Zuko was in no mood to tackle everything that was wrong with the world tonight.

Surprisingly persistent, the Air Nomad just wouldn't leave. He landed the bison near the river bank. Zuko could just barely make out what they were saying.

"...He didn't fall, he jumped", Sokka said loudly, "And I'm telling you, it's not something we did. That guy just has some serious trust issues..."

"Please come back!" Aang suddenly shouted, "We're not going to hurt you!"

The kids were coming closer. Still, Zuko was confident they would never find him in the dark forest. Not without firebenders on their side...

Suddenly Zuko could feel something new. There were firebenders in the vicinity. And other people. A lot of them.

"Drop your weapons and come with us peacefully and you will not be harmed", a stranger's voice suddenly declared.

The Avatar's gang was still too far for Zuko to see what was going on, but from the sounds of it, they had just been ambushed.

â€|Now_ what?_

Zuko wasn't even very angry, just confused.

Do they get into this much trouble every day?

"Wow, easy there", Sokka exclaimed, "We didn't come here to pick a fight. We're just looking for..."

"We know who you are and we know why you are here. One of our men followed you to the Fire Festival. We know you're looking for a firebending master."

"... Well, yes. On the long run", Katara put in, "Aang will have to learn firebending at some point. Though that was not what my brother was talking..."

"We will take you to see Jeong Jeong and he will decide what to do with you."

"The who now?" Sokka asked.

"Master Jeong Jeong. The first person ever to desert from the Fire Nation Army. He is a great and wise man. He will know what to do with you."

Jeong Jeong? The Deserter is here?

"Waaait, you guys are Fire Nation!" Sokka exclaimed, "But you think deserting from the Fire Nation Army is a good thing. Aang, Katara, maybe we should have a talk with this Jeong Jeong fellow."

"I'm not sure if we have much of a choice", Katara said.

The crowd begun moving away from Zuko's location. He could no longer make out what they were saying.

Zuko wondered if he should keep following them to make sure they were going to be okay, but decided it wasn't necessary. Jeong Jeong may have been a traitor, but he was also a pacifist. He would not hurt the Avatar or his companions.

Kinda ironic... This forest appears to full of Fire Nation traitors eager to help the Avatar.

After Zuko was sure the crowd had moved far enough, he got up and run into the night.

The Avatar might need me, but... most likely he'll be just fine. I could do right by my uncle, for once, and get back to the Colony as soon as I can. By now he has probably heard what happened. He'll be worried for me.

Zuko returned to the river shore. He was rather sure that this was the same river that passed near the Colony. All he had to do was follow it and, with a little luck, he'd be back with his crew and Uncle in no time.

Luck? Since when did I count on luck?

Zuko shrugged and began making his way downstream.

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A/N

It took me surprisingly long to post this. At least it's long, my longest chapter yet.

Again, credit where it's due: The three methods of learning wisdom "quote is one of my favorite quotes by Confucius.

And to those of you who read this and thought that Zuko should've just taken his mask off and told them everything, well, I'd like to point out that this isn't the season three Zuko. My Zuko would like

the war to end, but doesn't know just how diabolic his father is and considers Fire Nation winning the war an acceptable outcome.

And by the way, Zuko doesn't know that Uncle has been saying good things about him behind his back to Team Avatar. Iroh thought he'd have time to mention it later, because, seriously, who could have guessed they would run into the Avatar again so soon?

27. Payback

****A/N****

Thanks to everyone who has reviewed/favourited/alerted this story. I really appreciate the support! And thanks to everyone who had enough patience and faith in me despite the long quiet.

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****27. Payback****

Admiral Zhao's ship was preparing to dock at a Fire Nation Colony. From the considerable lack of things on fire or getting crushed by magical gushes of wind he knew he had arrived too late. The Avatar wasn't here anymore.

Regardless, Zhao would talk with local authorities and gather clues. With little luck the airbender was still somewhere in the vicinity and the Admiral intended to sent out search parties first thing tomorrow morning. Zhao's wondering gaze landed on one of the Fire vessels already docked. Even in the dim light of the moon he had no difficulty recognizing it.

Well well well, look who we have here. Must be my lucky day.

Zhao's lips quirked into a rare, genuine smile. Avatar or no Avatar, this would turn out to be a very satisfying day for the newly-appointed Admiral. He had been waiting for his chance for revenge and it looked like fate had decided to provide him with one.

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The sun had barely risen when Zuko finally reached the Colony. He wrapped the Blue Spirit mask in the scarf he'd been wearing and hid them both under the roots of a big willow tree next to the river.

As much as the Prince didn't feel like loosing yet another mask, it wasn't wise to walk around with incriminating evidence in his pocket. Not after the show he had put up last night. His thoroughly dirty clothes, complimentary to his late night swim and the jog through the woods, were suspicious enough on their own accord.

Tiredly Zuko made his way towards the harbor, dreaming of nothing but a hot bath and a warm bed. The town was still buzzing with soldiers, but that was hardly surprising: a sighting of the Avatar always caused a fuss. Zuko had lost count of all the times he had been one of the pursuers who came to the scene of crime an hour or two late, missing all the action.

"I see we meet again, Prince Zuko", a cold voice sang from behind him. Zuko turned to meet the calculative stare of Admiral Zhao.

The Prince suppressed an urge to roll his eyes. He'd just been up all night and, although he had had a good rest before that, he felt distinctly tired and grumpy. He was so not in the mood for dealing with Zhao right now.

"Admiral Zhao", Zuko acknowledged and nodded his head courtly, attempting to appear disinterested and royal. A considerably hard thing to achieve in his battered state.

Zhao smiled a predatory smile. He looked Zuko from head to toe, taking in the Prince's unusually shabby appearance, stopping for a moment to survey his new haircut. Finally the older man concluded: "Must have been a busy night. Not by any chance did you notice where the Avatar went?"

"Um, I didn't. No. But I definitely want to capture him and..." Zuko glanced to his left, cursing internally for not having thought of a good lie before-hand.

"...but he won't get away from me next time... or something", Zuko finally stammered.

That's the kind of thing I'm supposed to say, right?

Zhao looked at him suspiciously. The Prince was a terrible liar and painfully aware of it. Still, considering he had been saying something on those lines for years, you would've thought the lie would've landed more smoothly from his lips. It wasn't like he lacked practice. However, now that Zuko was no longer dead-set on capturing the Avatar, he found himself struggling to put his 'unwavering determination' to words that didn't sound cheesy even to his own ears.

Zhao didn't look very surprised; the man hadn't probably expected honesty from Zuko in the first place. The Admiral had to know Zuko was lying but hopefully he guessed wrong about which part.

"Oh there you are, my nephew! I was so worried for you!"

Uncle was trotting down the dock and waving his hands in an unnecessarily wide gesture to catch Zuko's attention.

Zuko cringed a bit, both because he didn't want to have a spotlight pointed at their discussion and also because he knew Uncle wasn't lying. On the other hand, Iroh's timing was impeccable. His sudden arrival distracted Zhao from his interrogation.

"General Iroh", Zhao got his act together and smiled a false pleasant greeting that quickly shifted into an expression of equally fake concern as the man addressed Zuko, "Truly, you're Uncle and crew appeared beside themselves with worry after your... unexpected disappearance. But now that you're back, safe and sound, do tell, where exactly have you been all night?"

"I..."

"Yes, nephew, I was worried. But we did all rather presume you'd gone after the Avatar", Uncle said pointedly, nodding almost imperceptibly.

"Yes", Zuko agreed, "I heard that the Avatar had been sighted and went after him but... I lost his trail."

"Did you, now?" Zhao said, obviously suspicious.

"Yes", Zuko repeated bluntly.

"And you really have no idea where he is?" the Admiral's eyes never left Zuko's, ready to detect a lie.

Zuko tried to match the glare: "You think I would be here if I knew where the Avatar was?"

He wasn't being entirely honest but if the Admiral noticed the evasion for what it was, the man didn't call him on it.

"The Air Nomad took off with that cursed bison of his and is most likely a long way from here by now", Zuko added for good measure, and internally prayed that the boy had done exactly that by now.

Zhao only smiled unnervingly: "Is that so? Because my intelligence strongly suggests he's still in the vicinity, hiding away with treacherous outlaws. I was, in fact, just about to take off with a search party to go look for him myself."

Zuko tried his best to seem indifferent. He shrugged and managed to bit out: "The Avatar is long gone or I wouldn't be here, but be my guess. How you waste your own time doesn't concern me."

Zhao's smile widened: "Well aren't I glad to hear that you're not planning to go after the Avatar's trail. I was so worried that you'd be disappointed when you found out that you wouldn't be able to do that. Thankfully not then."

Zuko tried to quickly process what the Admiral had said, but it still made no sense. It was always possible that Zhao was just trying to pick on him for no reason, but the solemn look on Iroh's face made Zuko fear for the worst.

"Oh", the Prince finally got out, "And why, pray tell, would I be unable to go after the Avatar?"

Zhao's smile widened, if possible, a fraction more: "I'm taking your crew."

"WHAT?!" Zuko looked between Zhao and Iroh for a while, too furious for words.

"You can't do that! Can he?" Zuko turned to his uncle.

Iroh looked very tired: "I'm afraid he can and he has. In your absence he has already assigned all your crew to his own ships."

Zuko turned to the Admiral, fuming: "This is outrageous! Everyone can see that you're doing this just to spite me! You don't need my crew

for anything, you're just afraid that I'll capture the Avatar first!"

"Don't be such a child, Prince Zuko. You brought this on yourself. Since no one wants to repeat the disaster your selfish, petty rivalry caused at Hailu village, the Fire Lord has given me supreme authority on all incidents in connection with the Avatar."

Zuko narrowed his eyes: "That doesn't mean you can just steal my men for no reason! I'm a prince and an exile. You can't order me around."

Perhaps it was because Zuko had already known of his father's order, but his voice came out more confused than angry. The Prince's tone and words obviously threw Zhao off a bit, but the Admiral managed to resume his gloating quickly enough.

"You're correct. I can't order you to stay here and abandon your futile efforts, Prince Zuko. I can only recommend it. Even you must see that capturing the Avatar is far too important for our nation's war efforts to be left in the hands of a boy. Either way, I very much doubt that you, or your ship, are going anywhere without a crew. Or the comodo-rhinos. Or your riverboat."

Zhao smiled contentedly at the looks of anger, hurt and betrayal flashing across Zuko's face.

Then the Admiral turned his attention to Uncle: "General Iroh, my offer to you still stands. After the Avatar has been inevitably caught I very much intend to go dragon hunting, and your expertise on the matter would be appreciated."

Zuko felt all his anger melt away, leaving only fear. The Prince wanted to scream but found himself temporarily unable to form words.

You little shit! You already took everything from me, but you can't have Uncle!

"I'm honored by your request but my answer has not changed", Iroh replied in a mild tone with a barely noticeably chill to it, "I understand your worry, of course. Taking down one of the original firebenders is indeed a daunting task most men are not cut out for, but I suspect my presence wouldn't be enough to turn the tide of battle. I fear my dragon-hunting days are long gone."

Zhao's own smile faltered but briefly before it returned with a menacing edge: "I see. Perhaps you're right. It appears that, back in the day, you were rather optimistic in your estimation that you'd killed the last dragon, General. I wonder, did you make sure the one you did in was the last one, or did you just presume?"

"Well", Uncle continued, unperturbed, looking into nothingness as if lost in reminiscence, "I was perhaps a bit rash and over-confident in my youth. I can see that now. Still, it has been a good forty years since the last time anyone saw a dragon. Are you certain this dragon of yours, the one that stole the Avatar from you, wasn't white and furry with an arrow-tattoo on its forehead?"

"Positive", Zhao snapped back, and took a deep breath to compose

himself. "Though I suppose it matters little that dragons aren't as extinct as advertised, since they will be soon enough, I assure you. Still, in case you change your mind, my offer still stands. Just send word, let me know where you are and I'll send someone to pick you up."

Zhao looked around himself with despise in his eyes. "Not that you'll be going anywhere far from here, I wager."

The Admiral turned to look at Zuko again and grinned, lifting his eyebrows. "Not that this is a bad place to stay. For an exile."

At that Zuko found his voice again. His words came out more controlled than he could've hoped for; not desperate or whiny but a low, menacing growl.

"You may think that you've won but you couldn't be more wrong. You can lie to others that it's my fault the Avatar has evaded capture so far, but I think you and I both know that's not true. The reality is that you aren't anywhere near cunning or competent enough to catch him."

"We'll see about that soon enough", Zhao forced his smile not to falter.

Zuko snorted. "You've gotten lucky so far. But you have no idea what you are up against, do you? 'Cause if you think the answer is a 12-year-old airbending master I truly pity you and any fool who'll follow you to your inevitable defeat."

For a moment Zhao looked so furious under his carefully placed mask of amusement that Zuko almost expected the man to attack him. With visible effort, the Admiral reigned in his temper.

After that he threw a few more insults Zuko's way before excusing himself from their company. To Zhao's dismay, his attempts at getting back at Zuko went right past the young man, though mostly because the Admiral had already hurt him in one of the worst ways imaginable.

He took my crew.

The Prince closed his eyes and bit his lip.

Zuko had taken his crew for granted for many years, but now that he was faced with the prospect of losing them, the Prince realized just how close he'd grown to them. He hadn't made any real efforts to befriend his shipmates, but sharing the same small space for three years had forced them to become a rather tight-knit team.

The crew was, in essence, the closest thing Zuko had had to family and friends, and now Zhao had taken them from him. And it hurt much more than the Admiral's insults. Perhaps even more than the fact that Ozai hoped Zhao would capture the Avatar before Zuko did, because that at least was predictable. Consistent, in a way. It wasn't like his father had made any efforts to make his quest easier so far.

As soon as the Admiral was out of hearing range, Zuko turned to Iroh. "Is he... Can he just do that?"

For a moment Zuko allowed himself to hope that Uncle would laugh and tell him the Admiral had been lying or gravely mistaken. That there was a simple loophole they could exploit.

Instead Iroh looked very tired: "I fear he is telling the truth. As the Admiral, he has authority over all of Fire Navy, and although he shouldn't be able pull men or resources from active duty to his own purposes without a pressing reason, this new order from the Fire Lord can be... it leaves room for a variety of interpretations."

The Prince took a breath to calm himself. He didn't want to shout at Uncle. In the end, his voice came out little more than a whisper: "And what about you? He can't take you from me, right?"

This time Iroh did laugh: "That would indeed be a strange day when an Admiral could order a retired General to do anything."

Although Zuko knew his worry had been ridiculous (Uncle would never leave me) he still felt something heavy unclench around his heart at Iroh's words.

Even so, the Prince's future seemed more unsure than it had in years, perhaps ever. Without a crew he wouldn't be able to steer or maintain the ship and would probably have to give that up, too. There were very few constants in Zuko's life as an exile, but the crew and the ship had certainly been among them.

On that moment Zuko had no idea what his future held for him, but at least there were two things he knew for a fact. First, Uncle would be by his side, no matter what. And second, he would miss his crew.

"We should probably head back to the ship", Uncle pointed out reasonably after giving his nephew some time to think.

"Why?" Zuko grit out. "It's not like anyone will be waiting for us there."

Zuko was being childish and he knew it, but today he didn't feel like just rolling with the punches. He wanted payback. He wanted to do something. Or maybe just destroy something.

Uncle looked at him sternly: "I understand you're upset. It's completely natural. And it's also healthy to express your emotions openly. But not here. Not like this. So I suggest you drop whatever idea you're putting together right now and come with me back to the ship. We will continue this conversation there."

Zuko was angry but also surprised. Iroh didn't usually speak to him in such a condescending tone. Uncle guided and made suggestions, he was patient and understanding. He never ordered Zuko to do anything.

Iroh's behavior was surprising, but even more surprising was the Prince's own reaction. Zuko... almost didn't mind. Because at the moment Zuko didn't feel royal or mature or responsible, and he could hardly blame Uncle for acting like... like a parent would. A real parent.

Also, Zuko knew Uncle wanted what was best for him. Iroh was sometimes demanding but, unlike everyone else in his family, never to

the point of unreasonable. Zuko not only trusted his uncle but _relied_ on him to help him when he himself felt lost.

So if Uncle thought Zuko was better than this then maybe he was. At the very least he would _try_ to be. Zuko nodded and they walked in silence.

After hesitating for a while, the Prince started up the conversation again. "But what about the Avat...?"

"He can wait." Uncle's tone left no room for argument. "This is more important."

Zuko was confused. "What could be more important than keeping the airbender from Zhao?"

Iroh blinked, twice, as if he had difficulty understanding the question.

"Many things are more important than that. Right now, this conversation is. Although the Avatar is the World Spirit, the world doesn't _actually_ revolve around him. Nor will it stop spinning every time Aang faces an obstacle. And since when has protecting the Avatar from all harm been your job?"

Ever since Aang mistook me for a friend and we saved a village from a volcano together, Zuko thought but said nothing out loud.

Uncle sighed.

"I'm happy that you are taking such interest in the affairs of the world, but I also want you to stop and think what you're doing every now and then." Uncle persisted. "And right now you look exhausted."

"But I thought you wanted me to..."

"Just because you know something very important might be happening, doesn't mean it's your fault. I want you to take better care of yourself. You, and your needs, are important. Not because you're a prince. Not because you need to be rested to be useful later. Not because you have a destiny. Not even because you're my nephew, but just _because_."

Uncle stopped walking and put his hands on Zuko's shoulders.

"I am proud of you for the things you do. But they aren't all that you are. They don't define you. No shows of courage or proofs of skill are required for you to matter. Whoever you decide to be, you are important. No strings attached."

Zuko felt himself blushing: "Yeah. I know that..."

"Do you?" The look on Uncle's face wasn't cold or unfriendly but it still made Zuko feel uneasy.

Of course Zuko knew he mattered. Or rather, he knew he could one day become someone who mattered. When he had become better, stronger, more worthy... but what? What was he trying to become? A good prince and future king? A ninja outlaw? A dragon? Something else

entirely?

Who am I?

The decision had always been Zuko's, but so far others had made it for him. From the moment of his birth, expectations had been placed on him, and those expectations had shaped him into the man he was today.

And still, Zuko _wasn't_ what people wanted him to be. His banishment, for one, was concrete proof of that. For a long time the Prince had thought it was proof he wasn't _enough_. Only after many years and several spiritual encounters, he'd begun to consider that being _different_ wasn't the same as being unworthy.

In small matters, the Prince had always done as his heart told him to do. Even when he knew his choices wouldn't please others. In big decisions, however, Zuko had done as he was told because, really, who was he to decide what was right for his nation or for the world?

I'm not, a voice inside him confirmed. _I'm not qualified to make those decisions. But I care what happens and that's more than most people making those decisions right now can say. I care, so why not do something about it?_

Wow, I'm starting to sound like the Avatar, Zuko realized, rolling his eyes. _Shoot me now_.

Well, since they had pretty much established that hanging around having 'fun' wasn't Zuko's cup of tea, why not do something heroic and stupid instead?

"We need a plan", Zuko finally deducted from his inner rambles, guessing that was what Iroh had been trying to say from the start.

Uncle nodded, although he still looked unsatisfied with his nephew's reply: "Among other things, yes."

"Well, I could sneak aboard one of Zhao's riverboats and..." Zuko's sentence was cut off by the incredulous look Iroh gave him.

"What? Not a good idea?" Zuko offered tentatively.

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Several cups of tea, many explanations and lots of _actual_ planning later, Iroh and Zuko were more or less on the same page about who had done what last night. Iroh had just finished giving his nephew a streamlined version of what he'd found out about the Dragon Warriors, when Zuko suddenly stopped pacing around his room and turned to Iroh.

"I know what I have to do next."

"Really? And what might that be?" Iroh coaxed his nephew gently.

The young prince took a deep breath to fortify himself, obviously expecting a rejection. He began pacing around again as he launched

into his explanation.

"I'm a Dragon Warrior, but I think we can safely agree that I'm not a very good one. By that I mean I haven't actually been doing any good with my new position and powers."

Uncle frowned. "It's understandable that you feel conflicted now that you have learned more of what your new role bestows upon you, but the way I remember it, you have in fact saved several people and villages with your dragon powers already."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Maybe, but I've only turned into a dragon twice and both times by accident. Stumbling upon one catastrophe after another may be convenient but doesn't exactly constitute as using my powers to fulfill a purpose. Other new powers I may or may not have aside, what good is this thing to anyone if I can't even turn into a dragon at will?"

Uncle waited patiently for Zuko to explain where he was going with this.

"This thing... it's my responsibility, and I know I'm not doing it right because I'm not doing it at all. You said Dragon Warriors are supposed to be able to control their change. Well, if that is true, I should start practicing without delay."

Uncle was mildly surprised by the turn the conversation had taken, but kept a calm expression on his face. "I agree that learning to better control your new powers should be one priority, but perhaps we should wait a little longer before starting actual practices. In truth, I'm not entirely sure how to teach someone how to turn into a dragon, and it's quite possible it isn't something you can learn in a day or two anyway. We could at least wait until Zhao is no longer around."

Zuko shook his head. "The risk of me turning into a large winged animal at an inconvenient moment isn't going to lessen by waiting. Also, just think about what it would mean for us on the long run. If I could transform at will, it would solve our newly-found transportation problems."

Iroh blinked. "Are you saying... Do you suggest that we abandon the ship and fly from place to place from here on out?"

"Why not? It seems to work for the Avatar well enough. And although I am small I should be strong enough to carry a passenger with me even long distances."

Iroh was thoughtful for a long while. It wasn't an outright bad idea, certainly not one of the more foolish ideas his nephew had ever gotten in his head, but Uncle was still somewhat uncomfortable with it. Zuko waited surprisingly patiently for him to voice his opinion.

"Even if, and that truly is a big if, you could learn this talent, it would be very risky for you to travel around as a dragon. No matter how carefully we went about it, there would be a considerable increase in sightings, and Zhao might soon find himself with competition in his foolish race for glory."

Zuko nodded. "It's a risk I'm willing to take, especially considering that traveling around Earth Kingdom coast as myself might not be much safer. I'm not exactly famous but I have recognizable features and Fire Nation has many enemies."

Iroh wasn't quite convinced on the last part. He was fairly confident that in proper disguise even the mighty Dragon of the West could travel almost anywhere in Earth Kingdom without fear of recognition. His nephew's scar was more likely to mislead people to presume he was a refugee fleeing from the war than tip them off that he was Fire Nation royalty.

These musings were of course purely hypothetical. There was no need for such drastic measures to be taken for them to travel undetected. Not yet, at any rate.

"Still, you would have to spend a considerable amount of time as a dragon and, from what you've described, it's quite different from being human. We do not know what the long term effects of spending time as a dragon could be like, or what the limitations to such transformation might be."

From the look on Zuko's face Uncle guessed his nephew hadn't thought that far just yet, but when he spoke he sounded unperturbed.

"I understand you have your worries, Uncle, but that's another thing we can only learn through trial and error. I want to and I have to learn this, or at least try to, at any rate, and I'd rather start right away. I have a bad feeling the Avatar's going to be in trouble again soon enough."

Iroh frowned in confusion. Why was Zuko so convinced Aang was in over his head as they spoke?

"I know the Admiral appeared to be under the impression that Aang was still nearby, but the young airbender would have to be a fool to have stick around after the performance he put up last night."

"Yes, but this is Aang we're talking about. I'm willing to bet my Dao he's just that foolish."

"But why would he stay?" Iroh asked, truly confused now.

Zuko shrugged. "I was left with the impression that Aang was looking for a bending master and was planning to ask Jeong Jeong. If the Deserter says 'yes' then they would probably stick around for..."

"Wait, what?! Are you telling me that the Avatar has decided to skip past two elements and start his firebending training and, perhaps even worse, thinks Jeong Jeong would make a good teacher for him?" Uncle asked, shocked.

Zuko could only blink. "Yes. Why? Is that bad? I mean, I get it that Aang is being unconventional, but even so, you have to appreciate the Avatar's logic. There aren't a lot of firebending masters willing to help him out, so you take what you get where you get it."

Uncle could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Have I truly failed to express to you how important it is that the Avatar finishes his

training properly?"

Zuko crossed his arms, annoyed. "No, but I thought the problem was that he only knows airbending, and thus lacks the balance and understanding needed to deal with other elements. I can personally tell you that, for a firebender, the kid knows nothing about fire. So how could a few rudimentary lessons hurt? He'd only be studying breathing, anyway."

Uncle pinched the bridge of his nose. "It is true that at the moment the young Avatar is... unbalanced. But it does not aspire trust in his judgment that he thinks himself ready to take on his firebending studies. Nor could those studies end in anything but disaster when he lacks the adaptability of water and the stability of earth. Aang, at his present condition, could not master even a small amount of fire. Also, even if he were ready, Jeong Jeong would not make a good teacher for him."

Uncle could tell Zuko could see his point now, but the young man still appeared surprised. "You don't think Jeong Jeong a good match for Aang? But I thought the Deserter was infamous for his slow progress techniques and, being a pacifist and all, presumed he would be careful with Aang and only teach him defensive firebending."

"Even so, Jeong Jeong's perspective on his element is too narrow. To truly understand fire, the Avatar would need to be taught by someone more versatile and less, well, bitter."

"So", Zuko concluded. "Whether Zhao finds the Avatar or not, we should expect explosions and disaster in near future. Ever the more reason to start preparing, right?"

Iroh found it difficult to argue with Zuko's logic, so he simply nodded. He had learned many years ago that he could not keep his nephew out of harms way and had instead opted to try and give him the best possible means of protecting himself when he did inevitably run into trouble.

The only way to protect the ones you loved was by teaching them to be wise, strong and brave. Unfortunately, sometimes even that wasn't enough to keep them by your side. That was something Iroh had learned the hard way.

"We can't practice at the ship or near the Colony." Uncle commented, trying to be practical. "A remote place far from all people would be ideal as not to draw attention."

"Zhao took all the comodo-rhinos, but we still have the ostrich-horses. We bought them ourselves, or I guess I should say you bought them since it was your money but, in any case, they aren't Navy property." Zuko turned around and started packing a satchel with anything they might need on their outing.

Iroh remained seated, absently stroking his beard and thinking things over. He had an unnerving feeling he was overlooking something important but couldn't figure out what it was.

Zuko turned to him again, done with packing and smirked at seeing him looking so thoughtful. "Come on, Uncle. Don't even try to tell me

you're not at least a bit excited by the prospect of getting to ride on a dragon like the Fire Lords of the old."

Iroh smiled back at his nephew, happy to see Zuko so enthusiastic about something for the first time since his breakthrough. Also, his nephew was perhaps onto something with that last remark.

Yes, this should turn out an interesting day.

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****A/N****

I think the chapters will be shorter from now on. As most of you have probably noticed, I had a case of writer's block. Although I have the main plot for this story figured out, it's a pretty complicated story and I just got buried under undecided details. This chapter went through several rewrites (hence the even-more-illogical-than-usual punctuation) but now I think it fits with the direction I have in mind. Let me know what you think :)

Zuko is being really thick and bratty in this chapter but I think it's sort of in character, what with him being tired and cranky. Lots of angst and talking, but I think there should be more things actually happening in the next one.

28. How to Train Your Dragon

****28. How to Train Your Dragon****

Fire is breathing. Breathing is life. Fire is life.

Zuko repeated Uncle's words in his head over and over again like a mantra, but for some reason he didn't feel any wiser for it. This was nothing new to him. His first fire bending instructor, a strict old woman who, Zuko was convinced to this day, hated his guts, had told him more or less the same thing.

Zuko sighed and opened his eyes. He almost wished an unknown foe would suddenly jump at him from the forest stretching on all sides of their camp but, so far, no such luck.

When Uncle had told Zuko he had some ideas on how to train his new skill, the Prince hadn't known what to expect, but he certainly hadn't guessed boredom would play a part. His life had lately been so hectic he barely had time to catch his breath between all the running and fighting. Perhaps that was why he had expected that learning how to turn into a dragon would happen right away or not at all.

Which was, in retrospect, a really dumb presumption.

Zuko wasn't outright bad at firebending but he had always been a slow study (especially in comparison to his sister, and people always made that comparison). Studying bending was small part talent but mostly just bitter work, and it seemed learning this would be no different.

Uncle was convinced that, like so often in bending, controlling one's emotions was the key to mastering this new art. Something about being

in balance with himself and the universe. Which in practice, it turned out, primarily meant meditation exercises. And, although Zuko was in no ways a quitter, he was starting to have doubts about whether they were going about this the right way.

Yes, the Prince knew learning new bending techniques took time. He understood the need to be thorough and careful. Still, Zuko had been breathing and meditating in an empty patch of wood for over five days and there hadn't been so much as a strange, inhuman sensation, let alone an actual transformation. Five days and there wasn't a single scale or whisker in the way of progress.

Their camp was a good day's travel from the Colony where they'd left their ship. Uncle had insisted that they take every precaution they could think of, so they had traveled on their ostrich-horses through wilderness so long that there really was no plausible way they could come across anyone here. Uncle had wisely advised Zuko to pack at least a week's supply of food for the both of them, and that really should have been the Prince's first clue that this was going to take a while.

They couldn't take along all of their earthly possessions. Or, to be more exact, Zuko probably could have but Iroh most certainly could not. They had instead used Uncle's position and influence to request the Home Guard of the Colony to look after the ship. It was, after all, the guard's duty to keep crime low in the Colony, so making sure no one raided a now vacated Fire Nation ship was not only their duty but a matter of pride.

Zuko was pretty sure that even if he ever lived to be as old as Iroh, he would never learn to be as eloquent and persuasive.

Anyway, with little luck, their ship would still be waiting for them once they returned. Whether they returned because Zuko had already learned all he needed to learn or because they ran out of food was still up in the air. Considering he had an affinity to mind-reading, too, and it had still taken him years to come to grips with that art, there was a good chance it would be the latter.

Still, maybe this would be different. Although Zuko had never transformed on purpose, he had still done so successfully twice already and had had a noticeable control over his new powers once he was a dragon. This didn't seem to be so much about gradual improvements as it was about difficulties in getting started. Once he actually got the gist of triggering the transformation, it should be smooth sailing from there on. Or so Zuko at least hoped.

On Zuko's first time round, the transformation had been almost instantaneous. Same in Pohuai Stronghold. Both times he'd been very emotional, mostly desperate, but they still weren't the only times in his life he had felt threatened or cornered. So what was the common factor? What was it that he wasn't getting?

Zuko sighed again and broke his meditation stance. He walked to the edge of the field where they had set up their tent, finding Uncle fully occupied in brewing a pot of tea over a camp fire.

"This isn't working", Zuko began without a preamble, "I already know how to breath properly. I _really _do. We are not doing this right."

Uncle took a deep breath before turning to face Zuko, calmly allowing: "It is possible you are right. Although I still believe the key is in emotional balance, I can in no ways be sure. The talent you are attempting to master is unprecedented. I am, by no means, the most qualified person to teach you something I do not and could not know myself."

"Unfortunately, the only original fire benders I know of live on the other side of the world. Even if we did somehow manage to find a means of transportation to get us to Fire Nation, it would not be safe. If you were caught returning against the terms of your banishment, you would be imprisoned."

Zuko knew Uncle was right. They had had this conversation before. Still, he was tired of all the waiting. So tired he would have just about preferred a crazy daring trip to meet the dragons over tedious and fruitless meditation. He wanted to either do something or at the very least be on the way to do something.

"You know, previously when I turned, it was due to circumstances. Due to having to get the power working because it was the only way out. Maybe we should try to make me feel like that andâ€¦"

"No", Iroh cut Zuko off before even properly hearing him out, "It may be that necessity ignites the transformation automatically as a safety measure, but that can hardly be called a controlled and conscious process the like of which we are hoping to achieve. It should not have to come to a life-threatening situation before you feel able to change your form."

Uncle poured two cups of tea and offered the other to his nephew, gesturing for him to take a seat next to him by the fire. Grudgingly, Zuko obliged.

He didn't feel like wasting more time over something as trivial as a tea break, but it wasn't like running head-first to go practice some more had worked any better so far. He had come here to talk to Uncle, hadn't he? So maybe he should _talk_.

Iroh let Zuko wait a while longer before continuing their conversation. "So, you do not feel that our current approach to your studies is the right one. Why do you suppose that is?"

Zuko hadn't expected a question. Usually, when training firebending, Uncle just told him how he was supposed to do it, and then he tried and tried until he got it right. Zuko was rather advanced a bender, but not a master, so it really wasn't his place to decide how to best teach anyone, even himself.

Then again, this wasn't an average bending practice. When it came to dragons, Iroh and Zuko were almost equally knowledgeable. When it came to transforming into a dragon, Zuko was the only one of them with first-hand experience. So he thought the question over.

"I'mâ€¦ I don't know", he finally said, "I justâ€¦ I _already_ know that fire is the element of life. I know it can be used for destruction and chaos, but it also feelsâ€¦ alive. Especially when I'm a dragon, actually. Then every flame and spark and _being_ seems vibrant and alive. And when connecting with another being in a mind

link, then too. So yes, fire is natural. Learning something I already know can't possibly be the key, can it?"

Zuko wasn't sure if even he understood what he was trying to explain, but at least Uncle didn't look outright dismissive to his nephew's ramblings. The old man simply nodded, looking contemplative.

"I think you are right." Iroh repeated. "To me, personally, the most eye-opening part about meeting dragons was the revelation that fire is life. That is what the original fire benders taught me, and therefore I thought that passing on that wisdom would be the most helpful lesson for you as well."

"But I indeed failed to consider that you already understand fire as a more wide concept because of your unusual training history. You have always had a different, very concrete connection to our element. You are in many ways more experienced than most benders your age."

"Yeah, and still completely worthless next to Azula." Zuko noted bitterly.

Uncle fixed a stern look on his nephew. "Your sister is an exceptional bender, I'll give you that, but in different ways than you. She is remarkable talented when it comes to learning new things, be those katas or war tactics. When learning a new fire bending technique, Azula immediately realizes what the technique is composed of, when to use it and how to execute it flawlessly. She undoubtedly has natural intuition and talent when it comes to bending, but she's also worked hard to hone her inclinations and to make the best possible use of them."

"You, my dear nephew, learn differently. For you, learning takes time and trying. Because your connection to fire is different on such a primal level, what works for most does not always come naturally to you. It really isn't surprising that your bending style is a kind of a kind."

"It may take you longer to come to terms with new techniques because you have to accommodate them to your own style. Once you've figured out a way to make a kata feel your own, it will not be weaker or lesser than the traditional style of firebending your sister favors."

"You and Azula both have your own specialties, but that does not mean one is fundamentally better than the other. Just because Azula knows more now doesn't mean you are inferior to your sister, Prince Zuko. In time, you will both be very powerful benders."

Unaccustomed to such praise, Zuko felt his cheeks blush. Most of the time everyone, Iroh included, focused on the things he was doing wrong.

"Aren't you the one who's always telling me how I'm using too much muscle and not enough breath in my strikes?" Zuko pointed out to steer the conversation back to a topic he was more accustomed to and comfortable with. Such as his numerous shortcomings and failures.

Iroh smiled a dry smile. "Well, sometimes you lack the patience to

give yourself enough time to learn something properly and end up overreaching, but you have made considerable improvements on that account over the years."

Iroh thought for a moment, his brows furrowing, before continuing: "I know I can sometimes be hard on you when it comes to bending, and perhaps I'm sometimes scarce with positive feedback, but surely you know that doesn't mean you are only making mistakes? It is as I've said many times before: I only nag because I care."

Zuko just nodded, still uncomfortable. It wasn't Iroh's fault the Prince was a pig-headed and slow apprentice who needed to be reprimanded on a regular basis.

"I just feel soâ€¦ frustrated." Zuko bit his lip. "I mean, I didn't know learning this thing would be so hard. While we waste our time here, waiting for me to pull my act together, the Avatar has either gained a huge lead on us or, better yet, has been caught by Zhao. Everything could be going wrong while all I do is waste time attempting to learn something that I may never be able to master."

"Zuko", Iroh sighed, "I know that I suggested it in the first place that you should try to help the Avatar, but I think I can safely admit that I meant you should rather try to help the Avatar than try to capture him. I primarily wanted you to let go of the mission your father had unwisely bestowed upon you. I didn't mean that insuring the airbender's safety is on your shoulders."

"The Avatar is very young and prone to making mistakes, but his mistakes are still his. You should not feel guilt over them. The same goes for Zhao: although we've agreed it would be wise to keep an eye on the Admiral, it isn't the same as making it your sole priority."

"But I didn't capture the Avatar like I was supposed to! If he does something bad now, of course it's on me!" Zuko exclaimed frustratedly.

"Zuko, your father may have made it sound like you had to earn your worth by proving yourself, but that isn't true. You do not need to prove yourself. Not by capturing the Avatar, and not by guarding him from harm. I fear that even though you have come a long way, you still undervalue your own worth."

"Your life does not have to revolve around the Avatar's. You don't have to drop everything you're doing every time we run into him. His life does not take priority over yours. Your progress is important, and the time you take to learn to know yourself is not time wasted, and it's not away from something more important."

Uncle looked Zuko squarely in the eye. "You shouldn't just wait for another mission that you can throw all your attention into, one given to you by outside forces. There is nothing wrong with seeking advice from time to time, but you must first ask yourself the really important questions: who are you and what do you want? Only after you can answer these questions can you move forward."

Zuko wrapped his arms around his legs, unable to say anything.

Iroh smiled and added in a gentler tone: "Come now, Prince Zuko, it's been a long day. I think you've had enough training for now. How about a calming round of Pai Sho? You can practice more tomorrow."

Zuko smiled weakly: "I brought food and necessities and you brought a _Pai Sho table_?"

Uncle smiled and reached into his back. "Pai Sho table _is_ a necessity."

ooo

It had to be long after midnight, but Zuko still couldn't sleep.

Uncle is wrong. He thinks I'm afraid.

Zuko glanced to his side to Uncle's bedroll. Iroh was still fast asleep, snoring quietly. Zuko got up and sneaked out of the tent. The night air was cool but not too cold for comfort thanks to the humid local climate. The Prince could see why someone from Fire Nation would want to put up a Colony here. It wasn't like home but it was a decent substitute.

On second thought, Zuko leaned back into the tent and retrieved his Dao. With the swords slung over his shoulder, he walked out to the field. Since the Prince couldn't sleep he might as well do something useful with his time.

Zuko started off easy. Just some basic moves in constant repetition. After a long day of trying to unravel mysteries of fire through philosophy, it was nice to just let go of all the thinking and just go with the movements. Sword fighting required thinking and planning but on a different, more instinctual level. You had to act and react. There was no room for hesitation or second-guessing.

_I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of becoming a dragon. I'm not afraid of _change_. _

Zuko made a quick turn and decapitated an unsuspecting flower.

I can deal with change. I'm no longer just doing what I was told without ever stopping to wonder why I am doing it. I know that I can never make father love me. I know that now.

Without even really thinking about it, Zuko added some heat to his next series of attacks. Not enough to set anything on fire, but adding little extra strength.

Who am I? A Dragon Warrior? But why? Why me? Who am I to fix everyone's problems when I can't even fix my own?

_Tuli chose me because she took _pity_ on me. She saw that I was weak and that I needed all the extra help I could get to make it in life. Azula doesn't need to cheat to be special, she was born that way._

Zuko stopped mid-kata. He pulled back and sheathed his swords in one fluid motion.

_I'mâ€| not worthy of these powers. _

Which was a silly thought, because of course he was. He was the Prince of Fire Nation. He was born to be Someone Who Mattered. He was _chosen_ for this task because heâ€| Because he happened to be conveniently available?

Zuko had always been very sure of himself. He had to carry himself with pride and dignity and not show any weakness or pain. If he couldn't appear respectable and intimidating, how could anyone ever learn to respect him? But did he really think himself important, or was that just a show he put up for others so that they couldn't see how much their opinions and whispers actually hurt?

Thenâ€| Am I worthy? Zuko rolled his eyes. _Well, that would depend on who I am, wouldn't it? It's a circular question, so maybe I should answer the second question first: what do I want?_

Zuko looked around himself in the dark forest and then up at the starry sky.

I don't want this, he decided, taking in his surroundings and situation. _As much as I enjoy a moment of quiet, simple life alone with Uncle, this isn't what I want. Not on the long run. Happiness is all very well and nice but I want to have a life of meaning._

Zuko supposed that it was probably more due to being raised to be royalty than any specific need to prove himself. Everyone in his family, with perhaps the exception of Uncle, seemed to have an ingrained notion that they should do something great and important with their lives. Iroh probably used to have it, too, when he was still a successful General.

Perhaps Zuko was born that way, or maybe he was raised to believe so since an early age. Either way, it was the way he was now. So there seemed to be no reason to question that.

I want the killing to stop. I want to go home. I want the war to end, but I'm not sure I want our side to win. If we conquered everything and everywhere, what would happen to people who aren't welcome in Fire Nation? What would happen to my mother and her new family?

I don't want everyone to hate us; that could never lead to a lasting peace, and the war has to end. I want my nation to be something I don't have to hide or be ashamed off. Not anywhere or from anyone.

Zuko thought of trust Aang placed in him when he didn't know it as him under the mask. Then he remembered the look Katara had given him after the first, and so far only time he'd read her mind, and shivered.

Father isn't proud of me and I don't know what mother thinks of me, but am I_ proud of who I am?_

Zuko thought that question over in his head. _I know what I want, but what have I done to reach these goals? Nothing. _

Because I'm afraid. Not of battles or responsibilities, but I am afraid of making another huge mistake. Afraid of wasting any more of my life on a fruitless search for something that never existed.

This time the mistake would be all mine, though. I couldn't hide behind orders and honor. I couldn't say I had no choice, couldn't blame my father for giving me an order or Uncle for giving me bad advice. I don't want to be anyone's puppet ever again, but the flip-side is that whatever I do from here on out, it's all on me.

Zuko took a firm stance and let out a long breath. _Try again_, his mind instructed him.

I am who I want to be. I don't know what that exactly is yet, but I am trying to figure it out, on my own. Prince, dragon, vigilante— these are but different names for the same person, me. And I am more than any one of these things. I am all them, all the time, and more.

I shouldn't be afraid to be myself.

Zuko took another deep breath, closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to reach for the ever-familiar sensation of fire growing from within him. He had many things he still needed to work out, but turning into a dragon shouldn't be one of them.

_I am a dragon all the time. It isn't a separate part of me. This really _should_ work._

And finally it did.

ooo

Uncle woke to a sensation that vaguely reminded him of how it felt like being attacked by earthbenders. Even after many years of retirement, he still couldn't entirely shake off the instinctual fear he felt towards sleeping on bare ground. He'd seen enough people go down that way. Literally.

It started with a small noise, and then the whole world turned upside down.

Iroh was scrambling to get out of his sleeping roll and into a bending stance when he realized the world hadn't actually tilted over. Just the tent.

"Nephew?" He called out, unsure. A murmuring growl was all the answer he got and all the answer he needed. Uncle stumbled out from under the fallen tent only to come face to face with a pair of dazzling yellow eyes.

"Nephew, you've done it!" Iroh congratulated and patted his snout, all his fears quickly melting away. Zuko made a sound that was undoubtedly a dragon-version of 'hurray', and then nuzzled his snout against Iroh's shoulder.

Uncle had not had much time to acquaint himself with his nephew in this form, but if the more open shows of affection were anything to

go by, they were going to get along just fine. Or quite possibly Zuko was just, understandably, in an exceptionally good mood.

Zuko moved a bit to the side, showcasing considerable agility for a creature his size. It took Iroh a moment to understand the gesture was meant for him.

Iroh's eyes widened comically. "You want me toâ€|?"

Zuko nodded, and Uncle wasn't going to say no. How many people ever got the chance to fly on a dragon?

It turned out that flying on a dragon was overrated. At least to anyone who didn't enjoy life-threatening swirls and loops. Uncle presumed Zuko was trying to be mindful of his passenger and squirm as little as he could despite his naturally wiggly stride, but his nephew kept losing his focus every now and then.

Iroh was certain Zuko would not let him fall. Or that his nephew would, at the very least, catch him if he did slip. And still, once they actually landed from their short first flight together, Uncle couldn't claim he wasn't happy to be back on the safety of solid ground.

I must be too old for this, he thought, but managed a smile for his nephew's benefit.

"Well, that was quite something. Next, I suppose, you'll need to master resuming your human form."

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****A/N****

Thank you all for your support!

Okay, this became more introspective than I had anticipated. More plot in the next chapter, which I have more or less written but haven't proofread yet. That one should be up soon as well.

29. This is War

****29. This Is War****

Zuko and Uncle returned to the Colony the following day at dusk. Zuko had wanted to get back in the game as soon as possible. He still considered nearly a week spent meditating on the wrong thing wasted time, no matter how much Uncle claimed he had needed that time to realize why he always grew so restless when he wasn't physically doing something.

As far as Zuko was concerned, the main point was that he had eventually learned to use his new talent. Although, as Uncle kept reminding him, one successful transformation wasn't the same as mastering a new ability. They had still both agreed it was a huge progress and that it was time for them to return to civilization.

All in all, Zuko was excited. So excited that he almost missed all

the commotion around them as they rode through the Colony. Almost.

Uncle and Zuko shared a look, dismounted their ostrich-horses and left them at a public stable, where the animals could rest and be fed. Normally they would've had the crew looking after the mounts but since they had lost the crew it seemed simpler to leave them in able hands for now.

Ostrich-horses were not an uncommon sight in the Colonies, but they still caused some unwanted attention and were therefore inconvenient to have along when snooping around. Zuko and Uncle didn't, after all, want anyone to mistake them for Earth Kingdom spies.

Their ostrich-horses had to share the stable with quite a few comodo-rhinos, and Zuko remembered briefly to be thankful that Precious and Haystack were already so accustomed to sharing their resting place with such animals. And comodo-rhinos really weren't mean creatures by nature. Despite their frightening appearance and willful nature, the animals were usually docile, at least so long as you didn't threaten their young. In fact, Zuko mused to himself, if a fight was to erupt, it was likelier to be started by the ostrich-horses, which were temperamental animals.

As they stepped out of the stables, a troop of twelve Fire Navy soldiers led by an officer walked past them. Uncle stepped up to talk to one of them.

"Good evening", Iroh, wearing respectable but distinctly not military attire, greeted. "I was wondering if you could help me. Everyone seems to be in such a hurry tonight that I really don't know who to ask, but I wonder if something is the matter. Surely we are not under a threat of an attack, are we?"

The soldier, a young man in his twenties, took one look at Uncle, and although he obviously didn't realize it was the Dragon of the West he was facing, the man apparently deemed Uncle harmless, for he answered in good humor: "Nah, you're safe, I'm sure. We've just stopped here to resupply for the invasion, is all."

Zuko was not certain which bothered him more: the fact that there was an invasion on the way or that learning about it was this effortless. _Wow, our soldiers really are __not qualified._ But then again, maybe it wasn't feasible to presume something as noticeable as a full-scale invasion fleet being gathered could go unnoticed anyway.

"The invasion?" Uncle asked, all innocent curiosity.

"Yeah, the one to the North. To go get the Avatar."

"The Avatar has reached the Northern Water Tribe?!" Zuko couldn't help asking. "But he was here just a few days ago."

Well, it had already been a week, and although it was impossible to get there that fast by ship, going their flying was a different matter. Which indeed was something to consider.

The soldier seemed a bit dumbfounded, but answered anyway: "Iâ€¦ I wouldn't know about that. All I know is what our superiors told us."

"How interesting", Iroh commented, "So we are finally to invade the North. How big an invasion fleet do you suppose it's going to take?"

The man scratched the back of his neck: "They've called everyone they can spare from active duty, so a big one, I reckon. Maybe the biggest yet."

"Well, knowing this really lifted a burden from an old man's shoulders. Thank you for your kindness, and best of luck with the invasion."

The soldier smiled politely and casually dipped the edge of his helmet as a goodbye, and went after the rest of his troop.

As soon as the soldier was out of hearing range, Zuko spoke up: "We have to stop it. If we don't, a lot of people will die."

Uncle nodded, answering in a hushed tone: "You're right. No matter how large an innovation fleet we gather, it is pure madness to take on the Northern Water Tribe on their home field where they have such massive territorial advantage. Even if we win, the casualties will be heavy. Unlike the Southern Tribe, the Northerners are very much undefeated, and will fight to the last man."

Zuko understood Uncle's point, but shook his head anyway. "Probably true, but that's not what I meant. I think something even bigger than just two armies bashing each other is going to go down."

Uncle raised an inquisitive eyebrow, so Zuko went on. "It'sâ€¦ I'm not sure about this, it's more a hunch, but I remember Tuli telling me ages ago that the North is very dangerous. And I don't think she meant dangerous specifically to me but to all children of fire."

"The Dragon Spirit told you to be ware of the Northern Water Tribe?"

"Not specifically the Tribe. She said something about powerful spirits living in the North and how she wouldn't be able to protect me there."

Uncle thought that over for a while before continuing. "Yes, well, I fear the question isn't so much whether we should try to stop the invasion but how we could do that. But first, we need to gather more information."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Let me guess: this time you pull on the sleeve of an officer and ask for specific details on troop employments. I'm not sure which is sadder, that you'd think to do that or that you'd probably be successful in it, too."

Iroh smiled. "An interesting suggestion, but I think there is, perhaps, an easier and less suspicious way to go about this. I was thinking of going to meet my friend Shara. She will probably know more and she will most certainly know someone who knows a great deal more than your average soldier. Our club has many members, some even in the Navy."

"Oh. And this would be the secret, members-only club, huh?" Zuko asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. But you can still walk me to her house and wait in another room while we discuss this." Uncle offered.

"No, thank you. If waiting in a lobby is all I get to do, I think I'd rather head back to the ship and see if there are any good maps on the North in your collection."

"Very well. I will see you later at the ship and tell you all I can. Then we can plan together our next move."

Soon after that they parted ways. As Zuko made his way to the dock, he came across more and more signs of the upcoming invasion. Not just soldiers but supplies as well were being moved from the town into the ships. According to the Prince's estimation, there were about half a dozen ships in the harbor that were probably here for the invasion, but that was most likely just a fraction of the full fleet.

They must be gathering the fleet somewhere further up north. Would be good to know where.

Zuko stopped for a moment to watch one of the bigger warships depart from the harbor. Their enemies often made fun of their ships with their pointy bow, but in Zuko's opinion they were sort of pretty. This one was certainly a great deal newer than the one Zuko had, and looked absolutely majestic drifting away, despite her gruesome purpose.

Having spend years living on a ship himself, the Prince knew it was unusual that they were setting off at such late hour, with the sun already setting behind the horizon.

They are in a hurry. That might be good to know as well. Zhao, or whoever else is in charge, must be planning to set off soon.

As Zuko tried to enter his own ship, two men from the Home Guard blocked his way. As annoying as it was to be parred entry to his ship, he was glad to notice that someone had been keeping an eye on their property in their absence. And they hadn't even paid anyone anything. Zuko swore to never again doubt Uncle's skills in persuasion.

Inconvenient or not, Zuko managed to relatively quickly convince them that he was the official owner of the ship. After that he dismissed the soldiers with words of thanks. It did, after all, seem more than likely that they would soon be vacating again, and they might need to ask for a repetition of this favor very soon. Therefore there was no point in antagonizing the Home Guard.

The first thing Zuko did after returning was to go through his stuff, checking if anything was missing. It wasn't that he didn't trust the Guard, just thatâ€¦ well. It was good to be sure. After double-checking nothing was amiss in his own cabin, Zuko moved on to Uncle's. He had first planned to do a full inventory there as well, but was soon discouraged by the sheer amount of things.

Uncle can sort through his own junk, Zuko thought and moved straight to the wall with a book case covered with scrolls. _Now,

let's see about those maps._

Zhao hadn't taken just his crew and animals, but most of the supplies as well. Zuko had been bitter about that at first, but now he was almost glad the stuff was gone. He had no use for it, keeping inventory of the ship was considerably easier, and it would have only gone to waste or gotten stolen when he left the ship behind anyway. At least now Zuko could hope those supplies were used to keep his crew alive whenâ€|

Zuko stopped his search as it finally hit him that this was really happening. There was going to be a full scale invasion on the North, and people he knew would be fighting in it. They were at war and battles happened, but this was probably the Fire Nation's biggest single military effort since the siege of Ba Sing Se. This _was_ war.

My crew will definitely be sent off to the North, front lines if Zhao gets a say in it. Or maybe I'm just being paranoid, maybe he doesn't really care one way or the other. Maybe he does things for other reasons than just to hurt me.

Still, Zuko's crew _were_ soldiers. They had signed up for this. It wasn't Zuko's fault. Except that he couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was and that he'd let them down.

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Worry shadowed Iroh's face as he made his way back to the ship. He had been right to presume that the Order of White Lotus had more detailed information on the upcoming invasion. From that angle, his meeting had been very prolific. That wasn't the reason for his gloomy mood.

The situation wasâ€| different from what he had originally presumed. It appeared that Admiral Zhao's plan, in all it's bold arrogance, wasn't completely unfeasible. If the preliminary ship counts were correct, they might actually be able to win. Which was, of course, not the same as good news. Perhaps even the opposite, for as little as Iroh wanted to see his countrymen die in a hopeless battle, the alternative probably meant an even greater overall death toll.

They were, after all, the invading army. Or, in this case, the navy.

_There will be civilians there, and if the Water Tribe looses, no one is going to come to their aid. _

Even though the Earth Kingdom probably wished Fire Nation would loose, they wouldn't actually lift a finger to make it happen. Just like the Northern Water Tribe hadn't lifted a finger to help them in over 75 years. Even the Southern Tribe had done more, sending a handful of ships to help in the war.

Suddenly, an explosion sounded near-by. Iroh's first worry was that in all the hurry to set off to war, someone had dropped a box of blasting jelly. If there were more explosives close by, such carelessness could cost many lives.

Uncle could hear a few secondary explosions but then just quiet.

Somehow, the quiet was more ominous. And then he could see the smoke.

Uncle went very cold. _It's coming from the harbor._

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"AAAAAAAHHHH!"

Zuko felt himself get smashed into the glass of the observation deck and then through it and into the cold ocean. He had barely time to notice that something was up, barely time to react and raise a wall of fire to protect himself from the explosion.

As Zuko hit the water the only thing going through his mind was that 'this can't be it'. Not yet, not just now. There was so much left to do. He wasn't ready to move on to the Spirit Realm.

So you can only imagine his disappointment as the world came back to focus and he found himself staring directly at Tuli.

"No", Zuko said, out loud or through a mind connection, he couldn't be sure. "I can't be dead yet. I still have to go to the North and stop it. All. Somehow."

"You're not dead, cub. Not yet, at least. You have to fight. You have to swim. Most importantly, you have to wake up." Tuli said in a rush, frightened but determined nonetheless.

Zuko was confused. "But if you're hereâ€|" He looked around, trying to determine where 'here' was, but could only see vague outlines of something in the distance. All he could see were shadows, like he was standing in thick fog.

"This is not the Spirit Realm. Only the dead and the Avatar can enter there, and you're not dead. But you can't stay _here_ either. You have to wake up."

Zuko felt like some invisible force was pulling him towardsâ€| something. The world around him became less focused.

Suddenly Zuko could feel again, and the first thing he felt was cold and, soon after that, pain. He had enough sense to fight his urge to take a deep breath, his every sense telling him he was underwater. Zuko opened his eyes instead.

In the utter darkness, Zuko more sensed than saw that something huge was in the water not far from him. Before panic could take over the Prince realized it had to be the hull of his ship.

Zuko got to the surface and gasped for air. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out of it, or if he'd actually seen Tuli or just imagined it, but from the look of things on the surface, he couldn't have been gone long.

He soon realized that the ship next to him wasn't his ship. The explosion had thrown him a good distance away from the burning wreckage that was left of his vessel. The water was littered with debris and fire.

Zuko could just and just make out shouts above the roar of the flames. There were people in the harbor, trying to get closer to the ship. Probably trying to extinguish the fire.

Zuko found himself wondering how useful it would be if Katara were here. She could use the water around to gush the flames. Which was such a ridiculous and useless thought to have (not like _firebenders_ couldn't put out fires) that the Prince concluded he most likely had a concussion.

Zuko tried to focus more. Now that he was thinking about it, although he was relatively sure he hadn't broken any limbs, he was feeling oddly drowsy. He should really get to the shore before he passed out again.

The Prince started to carefully make his way around the wreckage and toward the planks of the dock. When he finally reached them, he found himself too cold and tired to properly pull himself out of the water. The deck was too high above for him to reach. Zuko tried to shout for help but found his voice too weak to be heard.

Suddenly, someone grabbed Zuko's reaching hand and pulled him up.

"You're safe now, nephew. I've got you", a familiar voice whispered into his ear.

Zuko felt himself being wrapped in something thick and warm. _Uncle's traveling cloak_, his mind supplied.

"Not an accident." Zuko managed to blurt out through the haze. He was distantly aware that he was on his feet again, leaning heavily on Iroh for support.

"I don't think anyone noticed you yet. We had better get out of here." Uncle said quietly.

Even through his foggy mind Zuko realized what he meant. _Someone tried to kill you and they still think they've succeeded. We should keep it that way._

Zuko turned fully toward Uncle and grabbed his arm tightly. "Where are we...?"

Iroh smiled at him calmly. "To a safe place. Don't worry, my nephew. I'll not let anyone hurt you now."

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Iroh was almost correct in his presumption that they hadn't been seen by anyone. There was but one set of eyes upon them while he helped his nephew to his feet and began guiding him toward Shara's house. A red-clad, brown-eyed man with his dark, long hair on a simple top-knot observed the scene from a distance.

The man, a mercenary really, was standing in a narrow, shadowy alley that made him hard to notice. In fact, there was more than just darkness shrouding him from the eyes of potential spectators. A strange sort of magic ensured that even people who saw him looming

there ominously did not look at him twice.

"Why did you do it?" A scary, powerful voice demanded from somewhere above the man's head.

The mercenary looked up to see a massive white dragon sprawled on top of several nearby buildings, reaching her neck down to look the man in the eye. The man looked around himself and soon deducted from the general lack of panic and screaming that only he could see the ethereal Dragon Spirit. To everyone else walking by or attending to the fire, the dragon was just as invisible as his own true form. The Water Spirit resumed his natural shape, at least in the eyes of the white dragon.

Nakki turned to Tuli, smiling one of his most winning smiles. "Why, for the money, of course."

"Don't play with me, Trickster." The Dragon Spirit warned him. Her unblinking stare would have unnerved any mortal, but Nakki just smiled even wider. Then he shrugged.

"The Admiral was looking for an assassin. Someone who could get rid of the Prince in a way that could not be traced back to him. And he wasn't being very subtle about it! If I had not taken the job someone else eventually would have, and they might not have done as splendid a job as I did. By that I mean they might have been a little too competent in their craft, if you catch my drift."

Nakki flashed a conciliatory smile. He enjoyed getting on people's nerves, but even he had a self-preservation instinct. "I figured it was better I took the job, posing as an immoral Fire Nation mercenary specialized in explosives. Me and that ship have history, you see. It was symbolic that I was the one to send her to her well-deserved rest."

For a long while Tuli just stared, and Nakki wasn't sure whether she believed him or not. Eventually she opened her mouth. "Why should I take your word for it?"

Nakki frowned. Dragons were hard to read, but he was fairly sure she believed him. The fact that she hadn't attacked first and asked questions later told the Water Spirit with some certainty that the dragon did not, at least, believe him an outright enemy. Not even in the light of recent events. That was telling. And gave him hope.

Keeping any fear off his face, Nakki went on. "Believe what you may, but consider this: if killing the boy is my end game, why is he still breathing?"

Tuli didn't reply anything so Nakki continued. "It's not personal. I have no more desire to harm that human than you do. On the contrary, he's a very interesting specimen and I'd hate to see him die so soon."

To that Tuli finally replied. "He would have gone to the North Pole with or without your coaxing. There was no need for this violence."

"Maybe, maybe not." Nakki answered cryptically. "But now that his

enemies think him dead, he stands a better chance of actually getting there in one piece, yes?"

Tuli stared at him, her look full of loath, but Nakki wasn't worried. Loath he could, and had many times, handled.

"I think we both know my reasons for doing what I did, but what about you? I was surprised you did not interfere." Nakki smiled viciously. "Let me guess. The others told you not to meddle quite so thoroughly. They are pissed that you've hoarded the little Dragon Warrior all to yourself, aren't they? You know, just because you made him doesn't mean you get to keep him."

"He's my cub_. I will not stand by and watch idly as harm befalls him. If the choice was mine, I would not let him go to the Land of Ice and Water at all. It's too dangerous." Tuli growled in response.

Nakki looked contemplative and serious. "But it isn't your decision, is it? And, by the way, he's not your cub. He's a human child. He may be a child of fire and even part dragon, but he is human above all. You'd be wise not to forget that."

For a moment Nakki was sure the dragon would attack him but, to his great surprise, her stare turned cold instead. "You work alone. I wouldn't expect a careless Water Spirit to understand the concepts of family and duty."

Nakki just smiled. "Yes, perhaps you're right. I am an exceptionally poor Water Spirit not to understand those, aren't I? On the other hand, I do know a lot about people_. It isn't just shape shifting that I do, you see. To be able to pass myself off as one them I have to be somewhat an expert on human nature."

"I know how they think and behave and act, but every time I come close to thinking I know all there is to know about humans, one of them always has to go and throw a curve ball at me. And that's the thing I love most about them: humans are so unpredictable. Living with such silly and self-destructive beings can be troublesome at times, but they do make life more interesting by just existing."

Nakki turned his gaze back to the disaster scene in front of him. Tuli snarled behind his back.

"You mock me for considering Zuko my own, but it is not I who have forgotten my place, it seems." Tuli replied acidly. "You may be able to pass yourself off as a human. You may have learned to walk and talk and dress like them, but no matter how well you act, it will never amount to more than that. An act. You will never be one the humans you so love and admire."

Nakki kept his eyes on the scene in front of him. He didn't have to look behind him to know the massive Dragon Spirit had vanished into thin air. The Water Spirit stayed a while longer, watching from the side as the humans went about their meaningless and yet irreplaceable lives, the same way he'd always done.

Always an observer. An outsider, among spirits and men alike.

Nakki pulled a new shape on himself, a middle-aged woman wearing a scarf over her head, and walked away.

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Zuko propped himself up against some pillows. Uncle gave the attempt a condemning glance, but said nothing.

"Zhao", Zuko said.

Uncle nodded. "I should have known the Admiral's anger would not be sated that easily. I had a feeling there was more going on, but didn't act on it."

Shaking his head, the elderly man brought a cup of tea mixed with healing herbs to his nephew. Zuko accepted the cup, but didn't drink.

"I'm going to go to the North", the young man said.

"And I will come with you", Iroh replied simply.

Zuko had expected more of a resistance, but he was glad Uncle wasn't going to fight him on this. The young man still hurt all over and didn't feel up for an argument. Even so, he had to go on.

"I'm going to fly there", Zuko added, finally earning the anticipated look of disapproving horror from his uncle. "That way I can beat Zhao to it, and just maybe I'll have time to make a difference before all hell breaks loose."

"That is a very foolish idea, my nephew. It will not be safe for you to go to the Northern Water Tribe. They do not take kindly to any strangers, especially not to one's from Fire Nation", Uncle stated, dead serious.

Zuko managed a weak, wan smile: "It would be suicide for _Prince Zuko_ to show up there, but not for a black dragon, a known ally of the Avatar. The Air Nomad is extremely trusting. I have no doubt he will vouch for me."

"It is a dangerous and long flight, and you cannot know for sure if the Avatar's word will be enough to keep you safe."

"Well, I'm not going to embark before I've recovered enough for my wings to hold me", Zuko reassured. "And I know the plan isn't without risks. But I just don't care how thoroughly it's been prophesied that trouble will find me if I go to the North. Trouble, it seems, has a way of finding me wherever I am. The way I see it, something major is going to go wrong in up there. Someone needs to be there to make sure that all possible steps to prevent a disaster will be taken. And there are not many who could infiltrate the Tribe."

Iroh looked very tired but resigned. "And you will not take me with you."

It wasn't really even a question, but Zuko still shook his head. "It is as you said: Northern Water Tribe is a bad place to be if you're from Fire Nation. Or a human firebender, at least. I believe they will consider a dragon less dangerous in the political sense of the

word. Their bad."

More tenderly, Zuko added; "I promise I won't take any unnecessary risks. And If things go completely south, I can always leave. I'm not entirely without defenses."

Iroh sat on a chair next to Zuko's bed and rubbed his eyes. "We could infiltrate the invasion fleet. I as myself and you as an unnamed firebender. The masks are rather unifying."

"I would appreciate if you kept an eye out for Zhao." Zuko admitted. "And our crew. Make sure they are treated well. But I... I have to go after the Avatar."

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****A/N****

I think spirits messing with Zuko's destiny is damn near canon considering the impossibly unlikely situations and meetings Zuko keeps getting into in the original show. In this fic it's just more explicit.

And I can barely wait to get to the Northern Water Tribe. I've been working towards that for so long (plot wise) and now we're so close!

30. The Avatar's Dragon

****30. The Avatar's Dragon****

Zuko took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the iceberg. He had carefully placed his long, curvy body around the peak, front legs gripping one side while hind legs gripped the other, dividing his weight as evenly as he could, so as not to accidentally topple the thing over. These precautions appeared to be unnecessary, however. Despite Zuko's increased body mass, the enormous floating chunk of ice didn't so much as sway under his weight.

Uncle had told the Prince years ago, when they'd been searching the South Pole for the Avatar for the first time, that the part of an iceberg one could see above water was only a fraction of its true mass. From a sailor's perspective, this meant keeping a respectful distance to the deceptively calm looking floaters. Although Fire Nation ships were built to endure direct hits with ice sheets, even they weren't unbreakable, and no one really wanted to risk a shipwreck in the Arctic.

After all his years spent at sea, Zuko was confident he could navigate in the type of treacherous waters Earth Kingdom ships wouldn't think to enter, but flying and landing in such an environment was a new challenge.

Zuko had been flying three days now, and after he'd left the last patches of solid land behind him yesterday afternoon, the landscape had changed drastically. Since there was nothing else to land on, within his considerable line of sight, than icebergs or the icy water itself, Zuko had eventually figured he'd have to take his chances. So far, things had gone fine, though. No unintended dips.

From what Zuko had gathered, despite their fiery reputation, dragons were good swimmers. It made sense, considering they were natural inhabitants of an archipelago. Zuko was a great swimmer in his human form, able to hold his breath unbelievably long if he needed to. So, the reason he was reluctant to land on water wasn't that he disliked water, in any of his forms. No, it was more to do with how cold the ocean was.

Unlike an air bison, Zuko did not have a thick fur and enough body fat to protect him from these kind of water temperatures for long. The air, cold as it was, was more bearable: large animals could maintain body heat better than small ones, after all.

Still, this was far from an ideal environment, even for his tough dragon exterior. Having a long, skinny frame meant Zuko had much more skin exposed to the chilling wind than most animals his size, and he had to maintain a higher body temperature in the first place. His dark skin absorbed heat from the sun well, but did nothing in the way of camouflage.

Oh, come on, you can do this. Zuko thought, and shook his form a little to shake away some fluffy snow that had fallen on his back. _Roku's spirit animal was a dragon, and Roku spent four years in this climate studying waterbending. Pleasant or not, dragons can survive here_.

There was one feature dragons had, though, that Zuko found extremely useful here: big claws. Even before embarking on this journey, he had presumed they would come in handy when hanging on to slippery slopes, but it turned out they were also useful for other things, most noticeable fishing.

It had taken Zuko a while to figure out how to catch fish mid-flight, but he had been determined and well-motivated, and had eventually gotten the hang of it. Turned out his instincts did most of the work for him if he just let them. He was still no expert, but, thankfully, no one was handing out points for style.

Zuko hadn't been dragon long enough to start hunting on the previous times, but before he had left Earth Kingdom, Uncle had insisted he take good care of himself and keep up his strength. Zuko had brought some supplies with him, but they were for emergencies. In the same magical way that the transformation didn't destroy his clothes, the supplies had magically disappeared when he transformed, but would return when he turned back to human. Zuko couldn't access the supplies without shapeshifting, though, so that really was more of a back-up plan.

Iroh had suggested fishing as a less disgusting alternative to raw meat. In all honesty, though, while Human Zuko found raw meat unappetizing, Dragon Zuko probably wouldn't have minded it in the least. Still, fish was more available here, anyway.

Uncle had originally wanted Zuko to stay at Shara's house until he was fully recovered, but they had soon agreed that neither of them could wait that long. Zuko wouldn't probably be fully recovered before the invasion reached the Northern Water Tribe, and Uncle had to contact Zhao even sooner, before the invasion fleet left the Earth Kingdom.

So, they had compromised. Zuko had stayed until he was well enough to move around with ease, while Uncle looked up as many maps and scrolls as he could find on the North. Zuko had spent a few days practicing being a dragon before Uncle had been satisfied he could fly all the way to the Northern Water Tribe. Then Iroh had sent word to Zhao, as late as he dared without risking getting left behind, informing the Admiral of his desire to participate.

Zhao, having heard of Uncle's 'misfortune', apparently suspecting nothing, had arrived the next morning, on his flagship, to personally welcome Iroh on board. To Zhao's credit, he might be an annoying, assassination-attempting prick, but he wasn't completely brainless. Even Zhao could recognize Uncle's worth as a strategist.

Or maybe Zhao just wanted someone high ranking to explain his ambitious plans to. Or, quite possibly, he just wanted the Dragon of the West there to witness how he achieved his 'ultimate triumph', something Uncle had failed to do at Ba Sing Se. One way or another, Iroh was now in a position to keep an eye on the Admiral.

That night, Zuko had began his journey to the North, preferring to fly under the cover of darkness while traveling past somewhat populated areas. After the first night, though, Zuko had concluded that the odds of someone seeing him this far north were next to non-existent, and had been more straightforward in his travels since. Stopping to rest, not to hide, but only when he needed to.

Zuko looked up. The wind had been strong the whole morning but was now quieting down. It had began to snow: small, fluffy snowflakes were appearing in steadily increasing numbers.

It was time Zuko continued his flight. Although the iceberg appeared stagnant, it was merely an illusion caused by the lack of anything steady to compare it to. In reality, Zuko knew the sea currents were steadily moving the icebergs south, taking him further away from his destination. It wasn't a good idea to linger.

Zuko used the sun to confirm his bearings. Even through the thick clouds and falling snow, Zuko could always tell, without a shadow of doubt, where his source of power was in relation to himself. A very handy skill while traveling long distances through an ever-changing landscape of snow, water and ice, with no noticeable landmarks to navigate by.

After Zuko was convinced he knew which way he needed to go, he opened his wings, stretched them for a while, and took to air again. Zuko wasn't exactly sure how far he still had to go, but he hoped he was closing in on his destination. Time was running out, and besides, he sincerely hoped there wasn't an even colder climate he had yet to reach.

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Sokka steadied his footing and reoriented himself. Not a moment too soon: his opponent's next assault was quickly upon him. Sokka rolled to the side to evade the on-coming spear. Still crouching, he swung his own spear in a wide arc at the other warrior's feet, attempting to trip him, but the other young man had time to scramble backwards and just out of his reach.

Not wasting any time, Sokka sprang into motion and centered a new strike, hoping to catch his opponent out of balance. The hasty attack backfired, when Yoki ducked to the side with ease, and grabbed hold of Sokka's spear. Yoki pulled at the spear, and that movement combined with Sokka's own momentum caused the Southerner to fall head first to the icy ground.

A pain shot through Sokka's right shoulder as he landed ungracefully, but he couldn't let it slow him down now, or he'd be sure to lose.

Unarmed, Sokka improvised. He turned around to get to his heels again, and in the same motion he grabbed a handful of fresh snow from the ground. Not having the time to assess Yoki's position, Sokka threw the snow in his attacker's general direction.

Sokka was in luck. Sure of his victory, Yoki had made a dash straight toward Sokka. The snow hit him right in the face. Yoki stopped for a moment, but a moment was all Sokka needed. He, in turn, grabbed hold of Yoki's spear, and kicked the other boy in the abdomen, causing him to fall down. Sokka hurled the spear around and placed it on Yoki's throat.

"That's enough", Head Warrior Kinos cut in. Sokka relaxed and offered a hand to Yoki to help him up.

The Head Warrior walked over to where the two had been sparring: "Well done, Sokka. I must say your weapon of choice was a bit unorthodox. For a non bender, that is. But you also showcased impressive coolheadedness, and the ability to plan ahead even under pressure. Everyone here could learn from your example."

Sokka felt himself swell with pride. He had spent majority of his time in the warrior training losing fights. As much as he had tried to train his skills in the South, with no one to teach him, he was far behind his peers in most things. It was nice, for a change, to excel.

"But he cheated!" Someone whispered loudly.

Kinos turned to address all the young warrior trainees gathered in the training yard: "When you are in real combat, the important thing is to defeat your opponent any means necessary. In the heat of battle, your basic attacks are your greatest assets, but one must also be prepared to act if they fail. As those of you who have been to our annual hunting trips know fighting in the practice ring and fighting a real opponent are two very different things."

Turning back to Sokka, the trainer added: "But, it is similarly two different things to fight beasts, and to fight human combatants, which I'm sure Sokka here has experienced first-hand."

Sokka's face spread into a wide grin.

Laughing, Kinos added: "Not that fighting the Fire Nation can really be counted as fighting _people_."

This earned a ruckus of laughter from the group, but Sokka's smile faded.

Come to think of it, Sokka shouldn't have felt uncomfortable. He had grown up hearing similar statements.

"_Fire Nation people aren't even people." "Firebenders are monster_." "_People of fire have no soul._" That sort of things.

And it was true that the Fire Nation was the enemy, and _of course_ Sokka wouldn't hesitate to fight them off to keep his family and tribe safe.

And still. Something about the joke made Sokka feel uneasy.

The Fire Nation were the bad guys, but they were still _human_, right? At least the people Sokka had seen at the Fire Festival had looked a lot like ordinary people.

And not even all the soldiers, creepy guys with skull masks aside, were totally bad. Jeong Jeong, for one. He had been a grumpy, unhelpful old man, but also an ally.

And then there was Ari, the archer Sokka and Ilya had rescued. She had been a warrior, and even kind of cool. On the wrong side, no doubt, but not _inhuman_. In a lot of ways, she was just like the Water Tribe warriors (well, if the Tribes had girl warriors).

Hell, even_ Zuko_, the _Prince _of the Fire Nation, who should have, by all means, been evil incarnated, sort of wasn't. Was Zuko an enemy? Definitely. To be attacked on sight? No doubt about it. Evil? Probably. A really messed up kid trying to win his father's love?

_And isn't that a distinctly _human_ reason to do things?_

Sokka sighed and shook his head. He couldn't believe he was inertly defending Zuko, of all people. The same guy who had busted their village, chased Aang across the world, kidnapped him and Katara, and, well, sort of defended an Earth Kingdom village from Zhao. Yeah, that had been pretty decent of him.

Okay, when did things stop making sense? When did everything become soâ€¦ complicated?

"Look! In the sky!" Someone shouted, breaking Sokka from his thoughts.

Sokka gazed up and, sure enough, something was approaching. Approaching fast, and coming straight at them.

Everyone launched for their weapons, struggling to find their respective spears and machetes. Sokka already had a spear in hand, but he immediately went for his boomerang, his strongest weapon, which he had left on the side while practicing fighting with spear.

Turning to face the sky again, Sokka had to raise a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. _What on earth could be attacking them from the sky?_ he had barely time to wonder, when the being landed on the very yard they were standing on, some distance from them.

"WAIT!" Sokka shouted. "Don't attack! It's a friendly!"

Sokka strode forward to put himself between the Northern Warriors and the familiar, black dragon. The other warriors still looked ready to launch an assault, so Sokka turned to address them. "He's a friend. A friendly dragon. The _Avatar's_ dragon!"

It was a stretch to call their half-wild part-time ally _Aang's_, and Sokka knew it, but he had to get it through to their sister tribe that they shouldn't attack the dragon, and he couldn't really think of any better, simpler reason why not. The people of the North did not like any strangers, let alone scary, fire-breathing strangers. Even when he, Katara and Aang had arrived, the Tribe's policy had been to ambush first, ask questions later. Sokka didn't want to see how well a dragon would take to that kind of treatment.

Sokka could have claimed it was _his_ dragon, but that seemed unlikely. Where would a Water Tribe boy have gotten a dragon? No, it made more sense to say it belonged to Aang. The Air Nomad was famous for owning unique, supposedly extinct pets. What was a dragon on top of an air bison and a flying lemur? Also, there was more authority in saying it was the Avatar's dragon. Different rules applied to the Avatar.

To Sokka's relief, his words had the desired effect: the warriors stopped for a moment. They were still wary to say the least, some of them even furious, but also confused.

"Are you sure?" Head Warrior Kinos asked, dead-serious, not for a moment reverting his gaze from the predator looming near. Nor did he lessen his hold on his spear.

"Yes!" Sokka hurried to assure. "I'm sure! It's Aang's dragon. It's friendly and on _our side_. It has saved me and the Avatar loads of times. It even rescued Aang from a heavily guarded Fire Nation fortress. And it save an Earth Kingdom village from a volcano. So you do not need to worry about it, and you do not need to attack it."

_And it's even true! _They had to listen to him.

"The Avatar didn't mention a dragon earlier", Kinos sounded dubious, but he also signaled for the rest of the warriors to hold back.

"Um, well I'm sure we must have told _someone_ about it", Sokka struggled.

"Why didn't it come _with_ the rest of you?" Kinos demanded to know.

"Uh", Sokka really didn't feel like explaining that they had absolutely no say on the dragon's comings and goings. In stead, as he eyed the thankfully still placid dragon behind him, it occurred to him to wonder _why_ had the dragon followed them here. Then he noticed that the creature had one of it's whiskers lifted.

"Actually, the dragon has come here to tell me something. I'll know more once I, um, communicate with it. Justâ€¦ don't attack, all right? I know what I'm doing."

Sokka and Kinos' eyes met for a split second, and the older man nodded almost imperceptibly.

That was all Sokka needed. He turned to face the black dragon, and started walking toward it.

"Hi, there", he greeted, suddenly painfully aware that the creature very much understood speech. Well, at least it hadn't thrown a hissy fit over being called Aang's, so maybe it was going to play along.

"Good to see you're feeling better. We've been pretty worried for you."

The dragon nodded its head in a greeting. Yep, definitely a freakishly smart animal.

"So, you've come here to tell me somethingâ€|?" Sokka gestured toward the whisker. The dragon nodded again, and lifted the whisker even closer to Sokka, stopping a few inches from his forehead.

Mind link things crept Sokka out, but this was probably really important. Also, he'd be damned if he'd let himself look like a coward in front of all his peers. So Sokka took one more step, and lifted his hand to touch the end of the whisker.

His mind was flooded with images. There were Fire Nation ships. Lots of them. So many of them they filled the whole horizon. And there was Zhao, signaling for the fleet to start moving.

Sokka's mind snapped back to here and now.

"Oh hell", he murmured, and then looked the dragon in the eye: "They're coming here, aren't they?"

Another nod.

Sokka turned to face the warriors: "Um, the dragon has just told me that the Fire Nation is sending an invasion fleet here. A really big invasion fleet, led by Admiral Zhao."

The warriors looked stunned, their expressions varying from dumbfounded to utter disbelief.

"Yeah, we're really sorry for bringing so much trouble on you guys, but I guess we all knew the Fire Nation was going to do something, and I suppose knowing is better than not knowingâ€|" Sokka rubbed the back of his head. He was definitely babbling again.

"How?" the Head Warrior asked. After seeing the lost look on Sokka's face, he clarified: "How did the dragon tell you that?"

"Oh, right. Well, dragons can show people images through a mind link of sorts. And read minds. It's how they communicate, or something."

Now it was Kinos' turn to look like he couldn't understand a word Sokka was saying.

"Yeah, I know, sounds kinda unbelievable and creepy, but it's actually pretty useful. And I'm not making this up. The dragon can really talk through a mind connection. It's a fire thing. Some human fire benders can do it, too."

"Firebenders can read minds?" the Head Warrior stammered.

"Well, yeah", Sokka struggled to explain himself properly, "This Fire Sage guy we met said it was their element's special talent, kinda like water bending healing is for us. And it's real. Ask anyone. Hell, ask Katara: she had a fire bender interrogate her by reading her mind this one time."

"Dragon!"

Before Sokka had time to do anything, Aang flew to the yard, closed his glider, landed at the dragon's feet, and hugged the creature.

Okay, that wasn't the way Sokka would've acted around a predator with huge claws, but at least Aang's reaction was selling Sokka's lie that it was his dragon.

Hell, for all Sokka knew, the airbender might actually consider the dragon his. Since the Air Nomads didn't own anything, but in practice they kind of did, Aang had a pretty screwed up understanding of the concept of ownership. He didn't think he should have any earthly attachments, but he still considered things 'his glider', 'his Appa', and so on. So, maybe Aang would call the black dragon his by now.

The dragon actually snorted, and Sokka could have sworn it rolled its eyes, but it didn't shake Aang off or do anything aggressive, so that was a bonus.

"We were so worried about you when you just left like that!" Aang exclaimed, taking some distance to look the dragon in the eye.

Now the beast definitely rolled its eyes, but also nudged Aang playfully with his snout, in a friendly gesture. Aang laughed a little.

Sokka seriously hoped the dragon would want to stay and would be allowed to stay. He was already picturing some of the possibilities having your own dragon produced.

All the warriors will be so impressed. Not to mention the ladies. Maybe I could ask Yue to go for a dragon ride with me? Just 'cause she's engaged to a jerk doesn't mean we can't be friends, right? Sokka thought, hopeful.

Granted, Sokka could also take Yue for a ride on Appa, but a dragon would somehow be even more cool. Appa was reliable, like a bulky, long-distance cargo ship, but a dragon had to be the speed boat of flying things.

Suddenly, a huge slide made of ice formed itself over the roof tops. On it came Master Pakku, and, right on his heels, Katara.

Sokka was aware that the dragon had been a bit nervous earlier,

despite how it tried to play it cool. Just little tell-tale signs (and at what point had Sokka learned to read those?). But, now, upon seeing the impressive feat of waterbending, the dragon tensed visibly.

"It's okay", Sokka hurried to say, lifting his hands in a placating gesture, earning a dubious look from the dragon. "That's just Master Pakku, Aang and Katara's new waterbending master. He'sâ€¦ well he's an uptight chauvinist, but other than that he's okay. Mostly harmless."

Katara snorted disapprovingly at her brother's description.

_Boy, those two bonded fast, _Sokka thought. Just a few days ago, Katara would have used far harsher terms to describe the chauvinist water bending master, but now that Pakku had accepted her as a student and even taken a liking to her, they were all apparently supposed to just forget his earlier behavior. Sokka rolled his eyes at his sister. _Whatever._

"What is the meaning of this?" Pakku asked, his tone pricklier than usual.

"Master Pakku! This is my friend the dragon", Aang provided easily.

"Yep", Sokka cut in, "He isn't here to hurt anyone so don't attack him. He just came to warn us about an on-coming Fire Nation attack."

Pakku's piercing gaze landed on Sokka. "Really? And, remind me, how do you know a dragon?"

"It's been following us for a while", Katara answered seriously. "We were worried at first, but it has been really helpful to us since."

She turned to face his brother: "But what did you say about an attack?"

Sokka nodded. "Oh yeah. A massive invasion fleet heading north, with Zhao in charge."

Suddenly, Master Pakku took a step forward, and bowed his head in a formal greeting. Everyone, including the dragon, stared, but eventually the dragon responded with a graceful bow of his own.

"I am Master Pakku. It is an honor", the old, usually never this courteous man, introduced himself. "May I inquire your name?"

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This was unexpected.

Thus far, things had gone as well as could be hoped for. Not only the foolish airbender, but also his little more sensible Water Tribe friend Sokka, had vouched for Zuko.

And, as he had expected, everyone presumed Zuko was an animal, a pet.

A potentially dangerous animal, maybe even a _smart_ animal, but animal, nonetheless. That foolish presumption was something Zuko had intended to use to his advantage.

But now, Master Pakku was greeting him like a bending master would another, and expecting him to introduce himself. Which wasâ€| alarming.

Zuko couldn't help but wonder if the master had realized he wasn't a real dragon, but surely Pakku would not be making casual conversation if he had. A far likelier option was that Pakku somehow knew what some firebenders did: dragons had to be treated with respect. Perhaps the man had travelled.

In any case, Zuko hadn't anticipated the question. The Avatar's lot hadn't asked Zuko for a name, not even when they realized he could 'speak'. But somehow Pakku knew there was more to Zuko than met the eye, and the old man was expecting an answer, one Zuko couldn't afford to give. Well, not truthfully, anyway.

Zuko tried to quickly think of a good name for a dragon. What names did he know? There were Tuli and Ran and Shaw. Avatar Roku and Fire Lord Sozin had had dragons, the name's of which he had surely been told but couldn't remember now. There were lots of dragons in legends and plays, like the Love among Dragons, which Zuko had seen enough many times to remember by heart, but he couldn't pick the name of a known dragon and risk causing misunderstandings.

Toph had called him 'Flicker', but that was a silly name. Even if the Northerners bought it, Flicker didn't exactly strike fear into people's hearts or even demand respect.

Eventually, Zuko settled on a simple name with a fitting meaning. He didn't particularly want to connect his mind to Pakku's, and he also wanted to convey the message to all present, so Zuko reached his whisker down and started drawing characters on the fresh snow.

Since the Water Tribe already knew Zuko was smart, he might as well demonstrate that he understood just not speech, but could read and write as well.

This was the first time Zuko tried to write while in his dragon form. It required concentration, and his 'hand writing' wasn't as neat as he would have liked it to be, but he supposed it would do.

"Nice to meet you, Kulo." Pakku replied after reading the characters.

"I didn't know he had a name", Aang voiced out loud what all three children must be thinking judging by the look of them,

Pakku actually rolled his eyes. "And why does this not surprise me?" he commented, more to Aang than to Zuko.

Then the waterbending master turned his attention back to Zuko. "When will this invasion fleet get here?"

Zuko didn't know an exact date, there were so many variables in sailing, but, presuming Zhao would move the fleet at its top speed, Zuko would give it a few weeks. However, even though he felt sympathy

towards the Water Tribe for their faith, Zuko did not want to give the enemy more details than was necessary to gain their trust.

Telling about the invasion had been nothing short of treason as it was. Although Zuko had learned years ago that sometimes what was treason did not go hand in hand with what was wrong, he still felt a bit guilty. But, like Sokka had said, the Tribe had already suspected an attack was on the way.

Still, these people would use everything Zuko told them to fight his countrymen more efficiently. He wouldn't tell them any more if he could help it.

If only the Avatar hadn't come here, then maybe the battle could have been avoided, Zuko thought, even though he already knew it wasn't that simple.

Zhao had been planing this invasion far longer than the Admiral had known the Avatar was going to reach the Northern Tribe. The Avatar's arrival had undoubtedly sped up the plans, but a battle would have been inevitable, regardless.

Zuko had wondered if he should try to convince the Avatar to leave (or possibly kidnap him again), but that wouldn't prevent the invasion. Having come this far, even if Zhao heard the Avatar had escaped, he wouldn't hesitate to conquer the Northern Water Tribe just to be sure.

Zuko shrugged his shoulders. It wasn't a particularly graceful or helpful a gesture, but he hoped it would suffice.

Pakku nodded and turned to face the humans on the plaza: "Chief Arnook must be told of this at once. Master Kinos, would you send your students home, and then see to it that the Council is called to a meeting?"

The oldest of the soldiers nodded and started giving orders to the youngsters around him.

Pakku turned back to Zuko: "Thank you for bringing this information to us. If you would be so kind and wait here while we discuss this matter."

Zuko nodded and curled on the ground to emphasize he wasn't going anywhere, once again earning baffled looks from Team Avatar.

Good, Zuko thought to himself, _it wouldn't hurt for those kids to learn just how much further one can get with good manners and by showing respect to all living things_. _Though, in all fairness, I only learned that lesson a short while ago myself, so maybe I don't get to say._

Lying down while surrounded by enemies, especially by waterbenders, made Zuko nervous, but he didn't have much choice in the matter. If he wanted to stick around, and after the long flight, he really did, he had to first earn these people's trust. This was where Zuko could be of most use, and it would be a real shame if he was turned away so soon. All in all, now was no time to let his suspicions or pride get the better of him.

The ground was cold, and far from comfortable, but Zuko wasn't big on complaining. Also, he very much doubted there were many more comfortable spots closeby. The city was, after all, built on and of nothing but ice, at least, as far Zuko could tell.

Despite Iroh's constant reminders that the city was a powerful stronghold, Zuko had expected to find something equivalent to the villages on the South Pole, so the actual settlement had impressed Zuko greatly. The Northern city was nothing like the worn-down igloos he'd seen in the South. The city made of ice was quite beautiful, even if Zuko still couldn't quite figure out why anyone would want live on ice in the first place.

Zuko kept a casual look out for the Avatar and the waterbenders. Master Pakku naturally worried him more, but Katara, too, appeared to have advanced in her studies greatly in the little time she'd spent studying under a master. If she kept up that pace, she'd be a master herself in a few years, and although Zuko tried to keep an open mind, he couldn't help resenting the girl just a little for her Azula-level of giftedness.

To some people, everything just came easy.

Pakku was talking to Team Avatar. "Avatar Aang, Sokka. It would probably be for the best if you joined the Council on our next meeting."

A hurt, angry look crossed Katara's face at her not-so-subtle exclusion from the meeting, but then Pakku turned to her, and made a very deliberate gesture toward Zuko. "Katara, would you be so kind as to stay here to keep our new guest company?"

Right, Zuko got it the same time Katara did, if the look of dawning realization on her face was anything to go by. It's not that she isn't allowed into the secret meeting, it's just that I am a suspicious creep they don't want to leave without a babysitter.

Katara bowed to her master, stating that it would be an honor.

A logical choice for a babysitter / guard, really, Zuko thought to himself.

The dragon and Katara had met before, and he clearly accepted her presence. She was also visibly the least trusting of the bunch towards Zuko, and, quite possible, the one with best changes of matching him in a fight.

Not that Zuko thought it was likely that Katara could take him on, no matter how rapidly she had improved. She wouldn't be able to defeat him as a human, let alone as a dragon.

Still, it would be interesting to put that theory to a test. Zuko found himself briefly wondering how Katara felt about friendly sparring matches, but now was probably a terrible time to ask. Perhaps after the locals had had more time adjust to the presence of a dragon in their midst.

"Um, it's good to see you again, Kulo", Katara greeted him, making a

show of addressing him by 'his 'name'. "You mind if I stay and keep you company while the others talk things over?"

Zuko huffed, showcasing it didn't matter to him whether she stayed or left. All through the conversation, he'd been making an effort to act nice and cooperative, but this level of friendliness wasn't natural to him, and had started to wear on him. Also, Zuko didn't want to be viewed as someone completely tame. He'd rather keep everyone on their toes. It was more honest, all things considered.

You shouldn't trust me so easily, Zuko thought almost wistfully.

Besides, what was the point of trying to befriend someone who, if she knew Zuko's true identity, wouldn't hesitate to dice him with ice at the first opportunity?

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****A/N****

I don't know any Chinese, so when I pick names for OCs, I either pick random names that I think sound good, or use appropriate sounding Finnish words and names. I use Finnish because it's my mother tongue, there is no thematical reason or connection to the Avatar world. The words I use mean things in Finnish, but the meanings are usually random, since the sound of the word is more important. Not always, though.

In case anyone was wondering, in Finnish, 'kulo' roughly translates to 'fire burning ground' or 'burnt ground', but in a positive sense of the words. Kulo means either the burning itself, or the ashy, fertile ground created by the fire. Burnt ground is good for new growth, and kulotus (burning the ground) was a farming style used in some parts of Finland before the 20th century. It was done on purpose to keep the soil fertile.

I picked the name as Zuko's alias because Kulo sounds a bit like Zuko, and sort of refers to his ashy color. Zuko's been burned, but instead of being damaged goods, he is stronger for it.

Some others you might be interested to know:

tuli = fire

kurita (Zuko's mindreading teacher)= to discipline

aamu (one of Zuko's sisters) = morning; also used as a woman's name

kinos (the water tribe warrior trainer) = snow bank

On a completely different topic, in case you're waiting for an update on my other fic, Last Resort, the next chapter is more or less written, so it should be up in a few days.

31. The Northern Water Tribe

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_I'm babysitting a dragon. That is something you don't get to say every day, though, if Kulo gets to stay, we might have to fix up something similar to daycare for him on a more regular basis.

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Katara had a bad feeling about the situation, which was unusual, since Katara wasn't one to worry easily. Surprisingly, the part about being left to babysit a dragon all alone wasn't the part she was concerned about. She could take care of herself. Also, the dragon had simply laid down and stayed oddly motionless thus far.

I could try to talk to him, but what would I say? Uncomfortable silence it is, then.

Although Katara's trust in the goodness of her fellow men had suffered a blow after she had learned of Jet's deception, she wasn't generally wary of strangers if she wasn't given a reason to be. It was usually Sokka who played the somewhat annoying, but arguably necessary role of the suspicious one in the bunch. For some reason, however, today Sokka wasn't being as cautious as Katara would like him to be, and since Aang was openly trusting of people he'd only just met as a rule, she felt she needed to step up to the plate and keep a watchful eye.

The part that bothered Katara the most was why the dragon had followed them in the first place, especially after Kulo had made such an effort to rid himself of their company last they met. Despite his animalistic movements and inconsistent behavior, Kulo was obviously more than just a dumb beast, and it was this combination of smart and unpredictable that worried her.

The Gaang could deal with vicious monsters, and best even the most ruthless of firebenders, but Kulo was something different; something new, the like of which they had yet to encounter. She didn't know what the dragon was up to, or even wanted, but she had a hunch there was more going on than met the eye.

Katara wished Kulo hadn't shown up right now, or, preferably, at all. They had enough on their plate with studying waterbending, fending off the Fire Nation, and getting the Northern Water Tribe to see things their way. Most noticeably, to give up some of their more silly customs. Dealing with Kulo could have waited until after they had a better idea of what to do about the Fire Nation fleet. In Katara's opinion, even if the dragon would turn out to be harmless, they could have done without another unknown in the equation.

The whole thing boiled down to the fact that Katara didn't trust Kulo, and not in the way you don't trust your pet, because he is known to be impulsive and silly at times. Katara distrusted Kulo in the same way she distrusted anyone whose standing, opinions and involvement in the war were unclear. The fact that Kulo was technically a firebender didn't help. Even if the dragon wasn't on Fire Nation's side in the war, he was fire, which meant he was wild and destructive by nature. From what she had witnessed, the People of Fire had lesser morals than people from other nations did. Maybe even no morals at all.

Of course, Katara had no plans to act against Kulo, not without proof that there was foul play underway, but her instincts told her to be

wary of the dragon all the same. Only time would tell if her worries were justified.

Aang and Sokka returned, as they had promised, in no time at all, bringing with them the 'happy news' that Kulo was welcome to stay, so long as certain precautions were taken. Namely, they would have to take care of and keep an eye on the dragon themselves.

Aang was, of course, excited and endlessly optimistic.

"...should be great. I've never had a dragon before, but I knew people from Fire Nation who knew people who had dragons, and I love animals, so it shouldn't be that hard to take care of him, right? First, we need a place for him to stay. Appa and Kulo didn't really get along on their previous encounters, so I think it might be best that they don't bunk together just yet. I've heard of this other great stable where we can set up a place for Kulo. I bet he'll get along just fine with polar dogs."

Katara didn't have the heart to point out that having a dragon as pet might not go splendidly with Aang's vegetarian lifestyle. She turned to see why Sokka was being unusually quiet, and she had to bit her lip to hold back laughter at what she saw. It was difficult to say who looked more incredulous, Sokka or Kulo.

"Seriously? That's your plan?" Sokka finally got out, raising an eyebrow dramatically. He looked between Katara and Aang, as if really expecting an answer to a rhetorical question, and then sighed: "Yeah, sure. For the record, I am not against the sleeping arrangement you've just suggested, even if it means scaring senseless a pack of unsuspecting polar dogs. But you still have to get Kulo sold on it, and something tells me that is just not going to happen. Between you and me, Kulo doesn't come across as the type to prefer an animal shelter, no matter who he is sharing it with."

All children turned their attention to the dragon, who looked mildly perplexed, but then nodded at Sokka, and turned to deadpan at Aang as if saying 'over my dead body'. The look on the dragon's face was so expressive even Aang got the hint. "...Or maybe, we could get him a place of his very own, somewhere closish to ours. He won't fit in our sleeping space, but we could ask if there is another vacant igloo in the vicinity."

"Or", Katara said, with a smile and a gesture of her hand, "we could build him one."

Aang beamed: "Of course! Why didn't I think of that..."

Aang was already on his way to the house Chief Arnook had given to their use during their stay with the tribe, babbling excitedly, but Katara looked to the dragon to see what he thought of this option. Kulo looked unsure, even wary. When he noticed Katara looking, the dragon made a visible effort to look regal and long-suffering. He nodded his approval once. At that, Katara did laugh.

Kulo looked surprised and a little annoyed, but then he flashed a soft grin at her, and moved to follow Aang. Katara realized she had never seen the dragon smile before. For a being so big and predatory, Kulo had a surprisingly kind smile. A bit shy and insecure, but it looked like he meant it. Katara wondered if maybe she had been wrong

about the dragon. Maybe, what she saw as aggression, might in fact be roughness caused by lack of prior dealings with humans.

Maybe, Kulo has lead a very solitary life up until now_, Katara found herself considering.

Sokka had said something about dragons being next to extinct, and that Kulo might be the last of his kind. As the last waterbender of her tribe, Katara couldn't help but sympathize. Eventually, though, she shook her head. One way or another, she was over-thinking this; reading too much into a single gesture.

Sokka, had gone after Aang and Kulo, but Katara caught up with him. She needed to have a word with her brother.

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"Sokka, I need you to look after Kulo."

Sokka turned to look at his sister. To his surprise, Katara looked as serious as she sounded.

"Sure. Though I believe Kulo can pretty much look after himself. I could try to offer him some beef jerky, but he might be more the hunt-and-kill-my-own-food kind of guy. Food, which is, before you ask, fish, I'm quite sure."

Katara rolled her eyes. "Do you ever not think of food? Anyway, that's not what I meant. You should make sure Kulo doesn't hurt anyone."

Sokka turned to look at his sister, surprised. "Kulo wouldn't hurt anyone. I've never seen him even... Okay, well, I've seen him sort of attack people, but they were bad people. Besides, Kulo saved Aang from the Fire Nation, and helped save that village. Surely, you can't believe he is our enemy."

"We don't know what he is, or what he wants, and before we do, you have to keep an eye on him."

"Why me?"

"First, because you are the one who vouched for him, and told everyone we could trust him, even though we barely know him. Chief Arnook agreed to this arrangement because he trusts our word, and we need to be worthy of his trust. But, despite what you told people, Kulo isn't Aang's dragon. I'm not even sure he is tame, so one of has to make sure he isn't a danger to us or the Tribe."

Sokka frowned in thought. He could see Katara's point, but it still felt unfair to say that it was Sokka's responsibility, particularly, to look after Kulo. He might have met the dragon first, but, other than that, he really didn't know the dragon any better than the rest of them.

"Okay, I see your point about Kulo, but I gotta still ask: why me? I've got... stuff to do, and I'm sure Aang would love to..."

"Aang has to focus on studying waterbending. The whole world needs the Avatar, and Aang cannot defeat the Fire Nation before he has

learned all four bendings."

Sokka narrowed his eyes, though mostly playfully. "What about you, then? We should take turns."

Katara turned to look at her brother, and answered seriously: "I need to study hard now, too, because, when Aang is finished with waterbending, we will go with him to look for an earthbending master. If Aang needs help with water later, I have to be skilled enough to help him, because I doubt there will be many waterbending masters in Earth Kingdom."

Sokka felt like sighing, but opted against it. Most of the time, he couldn't care less about all the magic and the rest, but sometimes, just sometimes, he was jealous of Katara. Somehow, being a bender was this big deal, and made her important, and _sometimes_, it didn't feel fair that her splashing around was considered more important than whatever he was doing.

That said, even if Sokka couldn't always see the glamour in being a bender, he knew how much this chance meant to Katara, and would never be the one to take it from her.

"_Fine_", Sokka drawled out, pretending to be more offended than he was. "I'll look after Kulo, but I'm still sure you're freaking out over nothing. He is one of the good guys."

Katara nodded, smiling her thanks. Sokka smiled back. Although the siblings bickered all the time, there was little they wouldn't do for each other. Apart from Gran Gran, they were all the family they had had for years, and family is important. Family looks out for one another.

"Also", Katara smirked and bent a small snow ball to hit Sokka in the back, the same way she used to do when they were kids playing snow war. "I have to become strong, so that I can protect both of us when the Fire Nation gets here."

Sokka nodded, and tried to look more sure than he felt. He really hoped he was right about Kulo, because, if he wasn't, Sokka wasn't sure how he might hold back a flying, fire-breathing giant.

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What am I doing here?

Zuko lay on an icy roof top, his head between his paws, occasionally glancing at the waterbending practice taking place on the ice plateau next to the building he was curled on. In this icy city, Zuko had unsettlingly quickly grown used to having waterbenders around him wherever he went.

The Prince had been with the Northern Water Tribe for two days now, and had already lowered his guard around them, probably faster than was entirely healthy for a firebender hiding among enemies, but it wasn't like he could jump at shadows his whole stay. It wasn't very useful, or dignified.

Zuko lifted his head just in time to see Katara take down her

unsuspecting sparring partner with a waterfall-like wave. Zuko couldn't help but be a little impressed. In his short and mobile life, Zuko had rarely had a chance to follow up closely a young bender's progress, and never someone who wasn't a firebender, but, even so, Zuko was pretty sure Katara had to be a prodigy to have improved so much in such a short time.

The choice of attack was a bit of an overkill, Zuko contemplated. _But I'm the last person to lecture on the need to overdo things to prove your worth._

Master Pakku appeared pleased enough. Zuko couldn't quite hear what was being said, but if the smile on Katara's lips was anything to go by, the old master found no fault in her choice of attack.

Zuko sighed, and turned away. Although he had always found all bendings very curious to observe (when they weren't being used to attack him, at least), and he had rarely had an opportunity to see waterbending up close, Zuko's mind was currently preoccupied by thoughts on his own current progress. Or, rather, the lack of it.

Time is running out, and I'm no closer to preventing the upcoming bloodshed than I was two days ago.

The Prince had honestly thought getting into the Northern Water Tribe would be one of the hardest parts, but that was evidently not the case. Even spying on the Water Tribe, although somewhat complicated by the fact that at least some of them understood he was more than just a dumb beast, was coming along quite nicely. His plans to prevent, or at the very least affect the upcoming battle, on the other hand, appeared to be going nowhere.

Zuko felt like he was dancing on knives. It was dangerous and frustrating, but, at the same time, endlessly boring.

Zuko had spent the past few days gathering information on the Water Tribe's strengths and weaknesses, attitudes and plans, while attempting to remain as innocuous as possible. Any information on either side of the upcoming battle could prove invaluable in reaching his goal of saving, well, everyone.

As the Prince of Fire Nation, Zuko's main goal was to keep alive himself, his uncle, his crew, and as many Fire Nation citizens as he could manage. However, it was hard not to sympathize the Water Tribe as well, especially since, in the upcoming battle, they would be protecting themselves, their homes, and their families, while the Fire Nation would be the invading army.

Zuko's nation was at war, and the Water Tribe was the enemy. He couldn't lose sight of that. That said, Zuko was resolved to try to protect at least the Water Tribe civilians to the best of his ability once the invasion fleet arrived. He loved his country and didn't want to become a traitor, but just like with his quest to capture the Avatar, there were simply things that Zuko couldn't do with a good conscience, orders be damned. After you had questioned the legitimacy of your orders once, it was hard to go back to blind faith.

The Prince hadn't been very aggressive or daring about his spying activities so far, primarily because new and potentially vital

information seemed to pour at him from all sides, anyway. The Water Tribe was an isolated people; they didn't know much about the rest of the world, which meant they spoke almost exclusively of their own little lives and circles.

Secretly shapeshifting back into human to do more precise intel gathering on foot was definitely still on the table, but, so far, Zuko had deemed a daring mid-night ninja mission an unnecessary risk. Though, at this point, he would almost welcome the excitement.

Despite his lack of progress, Zuko hadn't been idle. Just after two days, he had a much better understanding of the Water Tribe's culture, hierarchy, and way of life. Their customs were somewhat similar to those of their Southern counterparts, but, in many respects, not.

The Northerners lived of hunting and gathering, mostly fishing, like the Southern Tribe, but were much more coordinated, and had by far greater populace. Instead of a cluster of separate villages, they had a centrally governed people, most of whom stayed in the capital at least some part of the annual cycle. They had next to no dealings with any other nation or tribe, but they did have extensive trade among their own people.

With the battle looming over the horizon, people from the nearby countryside had been pouring into the capital. They came here either to join the army and help defend their people, or to seek out shelter inside the fortress-like capital.

This society was more hierarchical than the one in the south, though still nothing compared to Earth Kingdom, or even Fire Nation. Zuko had known from his previous studies that Northern Water Tribe was a monarchy, but he hadn't known much more than that. He was a little surprised to find out that the throne was passed down in one family, rather than from one powerful chief to another.

Since personal strength and charisma played a vital role to a man's standing in social hierarchy in the Northern Water Tribe, Zuko had presumed lineage wasn't that important to them. 'Man' being a key word, of course, since these people didn't tolerate women fighting, never mind ruling.

In Zuko's opinion, their culture was full of strange contradictions, the line of succession being one of them. Benders were respected, almost worshipped, and still their king and his heir weren't benders. Apparently, the members of the royal family were considered more spiritual and political leaders than powerful warrior kings.

Zuko could appreciate the logic in that, since, unlike the rest of the world, the Northern Water Tribe was only nominally at war. Political wit could be more useful to a peacetime leader than great physical prowess.

Still, peace or war, Zuko doubted a non-bender would ever be accepted on the Dragon Throne. The thought actually made him a little ashamed of his own culture; surely, a bender wasn't automatically better suited to rule than a non-bender?

From what he knew of Earth Kingdom, the place appeared to have many

kings, who were, all to varying degrees, subjects of the Earth King. Some kings were chosen purely because of their lineage, and others because they were powerful benders, though customs were important in Earth Kingdom, so lineage took priority most of the time. The differences in customs were understandable, considering what a large, divided, and versatile kingdom it was, and how locally most of the parts were governed. Even if the Earth King was the acknowledged leader, outside Ba Sing Se area and the army, the central governing was loose at best.

Zuko wasn't entirely sure which mattered more in Fire Nation, lineage or bending, since the issue virtually never came up. Everyone in the royal family were powerful benders, and only married other powerful benders from equally long lines of benders. Although bending wasn't hereditary but a gift from the spirits, benders were often gifted with powerful and strong-willed bender children, so the odds of a non-bender being born as an heir to the throne were very slim.

Looking at the issue from that angle, it was no wonder Ozai had been so angry and ashamed when it had taken Zuko longer than usual to showcase any bending talent. Even though Ozai had not been the Fire Lord then, and Zuko had not been the first in line to the throne, his father must have taken the gossip about Zuko being without Agni's gift as a personal insult to his persona.

Even after Zuko eventually proved himself a firebender, Ozai had always been especially harsh on his son when it came to bending, accepting nothing short of perfection. Or maybe, Ozai wasn't especially hard on Zuko, but on both his children, and Zuko was simply the only one of the two not able to meet his expectations. Either way, Ozai had always considered Zuko an inferior bender, and had never missed an opportunity to point it out.

Zuko shifted in his place, huffed in frustration, and got up. He hated the calm before the storm. It made him fidget, like an enemy just beyond your sight, or thunder clouds just below the horizon. Waiting for something bad and seemingly unavoidable to happen always made him feel small and insignificant in ways nothing else could.

Iroh had said that patience was a crucial part of all plans. It was like playing Pai Sho: getting your pieces into right places without your enemy realizing what you were up to, was just as important as putting your plan into action. Too bad Zuko had no significant pieces under his control just yet, and the Prince had a gnawing feeling there were forces at play here far greater than his own, laughing at his futile attempts at changing the course of history.

Still, Zuko had never been one to give up just because everyone told him that what he was trying to accomplish was impossible.

They said the same thing about finding the Avatar.

Zuko's gaze sought out the boy in question. Aang had gotten tired of listening to Master Pakku, again, and was instead using his airbending to toss around snow balls.

Zuko smirked. As annoying as Aang's lack of focus was, Zuko would have been lying if he'd claimed the Avatar's childlike innocence

wasn't at least a bit endearing. Innocence and optimism were hard to come by these days, and Aang was like a living reminiscence of a happier, more peaceful time. The things he said and did didn't always make sense, but he was a curious thing nevertheless.

Aang was a contradiction; he was a symbol of hope, but also a wild card. Even so, Zuko was starting to see a pattern to Aang's behavior.

Most of the time, Aang was, much like his predecessors, an entirely reactive force. Like Avatar Kyoshi with Chin the Conqueror, and Avatar Roku with Fire Lord Sozin, he reacted to threats only once they came knocking on his door, and no sooner. Whenever Aang would encounter something he considered wrong, he would do whatever it took to make it better. However, apart from reacting to obvious injustice, the Avatar didn't appear keen on being the one starting fights, or even taking preventative measures to avoid future conflicts.

The fact that the Avatar was a reactive force maintaining order, rather than a proactive force initiating change and taking preventative measures, was probably partly the reason why the Avatar used to be so popular among all nations. Especially after what happened to the Air Nomads, most people in the world wanted to keep the good things they already had, and were afraid of change, fearing things getting worse instead of better, with perhaps the exception of Fire Nation. If Aang started telling people what to do too emphatically, expecting them to share and compromise on their own comforts in the name of common good, he would lose support at least among the well-off.

Still, the world had changed much in Aang's absence, and the current Avatar's position was vastly different from his predecessors'. If Aang ever hoped to end the war and restore balance to the world, the kid would have to take a more active role.

_Like with this upcoming invasion. For a pacifist, Aang's surprisingly unconcerned by the looming battle. Everyone here knows it is coming, knew even before I told them, and they expect the Avatar to do something about it. And Aang will. Once it gets here, and not a moment sooner. _

_Aang wants to wait until the last minute, hoping things work out on their own. However, for someone in Aang's position, doing nothing isn't __neutrality, or the peaceful and fair thing to do. Doing nothing is already showing preference.__

Zuko could try to make Aang see that he needed to stop fooling around and come up with a plan, but the realization would probably go over better if Aang figured it out for himself, without prodding. Besides, Zuko was fairly sure that, eventually, Aang would take action to further his goals, and that was a day Zuko both feared and looked forward to. The day Aang would take his job as the savior of the world seriously would either be the making of him, or his greatest mistake, depending on how the Avatar decided to go about reaching his goals, and with whose guidance. The kid was just twelve, after all. He was bound to be looking for help from some direction.

The good thing about Zuko's current situation was that he could keep a close eye on the Avatar without raising suspicion, since the Avatar's gang followed Zuko wherever he went. Also, Aang wasn't the

least bit suspicious of Zuko, and although the Water Tribe siblings were nominally more wary, all in all, the situation was rather stable. If that could be called a positive thing.

_Aang may not be doing much, but at least he is doing _something_ productive with his time. I'm fairing no better against the invasion myself. _

Unfortunately, despite knowing the invasion was coming, and having an inside man on both sides of the battle, Zuko's actual odds of being able to call the whole thing off weren't great. As much as being a Dragon Warrior was supposed to give him extra leverage in 'shaping destiny', or something on those lines, in practice, it just wasn't enough to stop the tide.

To Aang's credit, it was quite possible not even the Avatar had enough power to stop things from escalating, when both sides of the conflict saw their enemies as less than humans, and felt that they were fully justified in their pursuit of utter dominance over the other. Zuko supposed there was only one person who could call off the attack now, and that was the Fire Lord. Bendings, popularities, and spirit allies aside, the one who held the most political power held the only kind of power that really made a difference.

Zuko stretched his body and shook some snow off of himself. A few people passing by were startled by the sudden movement above their heads, and continued moving at a friskier pace. Zuko paid little mind to them.

_No more waiting around. No more gathering information while wishing an answer will fall from the sky. I'm _not_ the Avatar. Now, all I have to do is stop a hundred years of hatred and killing, and call off the largest invasion fleet in history. And, quite possibly, kill Zhao._

So far, the only viable plan Zuko had come up with was assassinating Zhao. However, the Prince's distaste for that sort of activities aside, the biggest problem with that plan was that even Zhao's untimely death was unlikely to be enough to prevent the battle.

With the invasion gathered and en route, not even change in leadership would enable calling the whole thing off. Whoever became Admiral after Zhao, wouldn't, and perhaps even couldn't, order the fleet to turn around and return to Earth Kingdom. That would be a huge waste of resources with no noticeably benefits, and a suicide for anyone's political or military career. It just wasn't going to happen.

"Hello there", a voice greeted Zuko from below. The Prince wasn't all too surprised to see Sokka waving at him. Zuko returned the greeting with a bow of his head, but didn't climb down from the roof.

Whatever the reason, during the past couple of days, Sokka had become Zuko's shadow. Sokka was surprisingly smooth about the whole thing, though. If the boy was suspicious of Zuko, he certainly hid it better than his sister.

The following around was a little inconvenient, but also kind of... flattering. Zuko wasn't used to people, other than Uncle, seeking out

his company. Ever since his banishment, he was, literally and figuratively, a branded man.

"Had a pleasant nap?" Sokka quipped. Zuko did the equivalent of a shrug. Sokka's smile brightened a fraction. "You bored yet?"

Zuko nodded, and only when Sokka shouted 'Excellent!', he realized he probably should've said 'no'. The other teen was obviously up to something, and, as amusing as Sokka's antics could be, Zuko didn't have time for distractions.

"So, I was thinking", Sokka began, speaking even faster than usual. "There is this girl who has been showing me the city, what with me being new in town and all, and she is also going through this really hard time, so, I thought the least I could do was cheer her up a bit, and I really can't think of anything better than a little sightseeing cruise via sky, right?"

Sokka considered for a moment but went on before Zuko had time to communicate anything.

"Okay, granted, I may not have thought flying was the coolest thing in the world from day one, but it has grown on me. And I want to do something really special and unique to, you know, impress her. So what do you say? You up for stretching your wings, say, tomorrow at noon?"

Zuko had to give it to Sokka; the kid could be really honest about his intentions, and his plan to woo a girl was kind of cute in all its shy hopefulness. Zuko wished he could be as straightforward and open about showing affection as Sokka, though that was a topic for another time.

Zuko reached down with his tale to write his answer.

Sokka read it quickly, and looked up with a disbelieving frown. "Why not?"

Zuko wrote further. Sokka made an exasperated noise. "Yeah, but that was, like, three days ago. I get it that it is a long flight from Earth Kingdom to here, but you can't still be out of breath. Appa never needed to rest for that long, no matter how far..."

More writing.

"Okay, I also get that Aang can be quite... energetic, but you've kept up marvelously. And I know Katara was a little too hard on you, since it was supposed to be a friendly sparring session and all, but it's nothing personal. Really, she is just competitive that way."

Zuko wrote a few more lines.

Sokka read them. "Of course I could ask Appa, but I'm asking you. You're supposed to be my friend, and this is the kind of thing friends do for each other."

Zuko felt a small twinge at that, and, for a moment, he figured the trip really couldn't take that long, but, in the end, he wasn't swayed from his decision.

The wolf-tailed warrior sighed. To Zuko's relief, Sokka sounded defeated, but not terribly disappointed or angry, and Zuko had a knack for recognizing disappointment and anger.

"Fine. I guess Princess Yue and I are just going to have to make do with option number two: the furry and safe, though-not-as-cool ride."

Princess Yue? Zuko had heard a rumor that Sokka had dealings with the Chief's only child, but he'd also gotten the impression from other gossip that she was already promised to someone else, so what was Sokka's game? Well, it didn't really matter. This could actually turn out useful. Sort of.

Zuko landed in front of Sokka, and wrote that he'd just been messing with the boy. Sokka looked delighted, and, to Zuko's horror, hugged his neck tightly as a thanks.

In all honesty, Zuko was still doing this more to please Sokka than because there were huge advantages in it for him, but he figured that, if he didn't have a plan by tomorrow, the sightseeing session could be a last ditch effort. He doubted the Princess would blurt out national secret's to her secret love or his pet dragon, but, at this point, anything was worth a shot.

Zuko would keep the flight short, though. He should preserve his strength, and, admittedly, he was still practicing having passengers onboard instead of at his claws, and he really didn't want to risk accidentally dropping anyone.

"Hey, Sokka!" A well-built young man ran up to meet them, surprisingly undisturbed by the sight of the scrawny boy hugging a dragon. Sokka untangled rather quickly, and greeted the newcomer unsurely.

"Hey... Taro, was it?"

"Yep, that's me. Look, you forgot this at the training grounds, and I thought I'd bring it to you straight away, before I forgot."

Sokka took the item he was given and thanked the young man. Taro said it was nothing, but Zuko noticed that Taro's attention wasn't in the conversation. He was looking past Sokka and Zuko at the waterbending training taking place further away. Sokka noticed that, too.

"You a bender?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Yeah... What? No. Just interested, I guess." The taller man gave Sokka a quick smile before returning his attention to the benders.

"Say, Sokka, is that your sister over there? Katara's her name, right?" The older boy asked with careful casualness. He brushed his dreadlocks away from his eyes, and somehow managed to stretch his biceps while at it. During his display, Taro never took his eyes off of the benders, so he didn't notice the don't-even-think-about-it look Sokka was giving him.

"She must be really talented if Pakku agreed to take her on as a

student. A bit short, but certainly easy on the eye. A girl like her must have dozens of suitors back on the South Pole, eh?" Taro ventured.

Sokka did not look amused in the least. "No, not really. She is only fourteen, you know."

Taro looked unconcerned, apparently either oblivious to social clues or uncaring of them. "Well, sure she is a bit too young to marry yet, but that doesn't mean her father couldn't already be looking into options, right? But you say there is no one planned for her? Well, that's probably to do with that temperament of hers. Such a personality might scare some away, but I, on the other hand, have always liked..."

Zuko snorted, but then his eyes narrowed as a strange scent caught his attention. It was somewhat like the smell of drying seaweed, but with an odd, metallic flavor to it as well. It wasn't a particularly unpleasant smell, and it was quite faint, but something about it made Zuko restless. He had smelled it somewhere before, but where?

And then all the pieces clicked into place, and, when they did, Zuko pounced like a cat and landed with equal grace, his downed foe wriggling helplessly under his front paws.

Gotch ya.

Sokka gaped, speechless. Zuko growled a low, menacing growl, his teeth inches from Taro's face.

"Gahh! Get it off of me!" Taro wailed, flailing in panic and eyes wide in fear. It was an impressive performance, really, if not for the distinct lack of fear in the boy's seaweed-like smell.

"Kulo! What are you doing?" Sokka shouted, genuinely frantic. "Taro is a nice guy. Well, not a _nice_ nice guy, but..."

Zuko locked eyes with the creature under him. 'Taro' went completely still and quiet, and then, gave a small, appreciative smile.

The blue-eyed spirit, still in his disguise, leaned in what little he could, and whispered so quietly that only Zuko could hear: "You caught me. Congratulations, but what will you do next? Oh, and whatever you decide, do bear in mind, we have an audience."

A crowd was indeed gathering around them, though they were keeping a respectful distance for now. Sokka was explaining to everyone that Kulo was a nice dragon, and that he was only playing, and would never actually hurt anyone. From his emphatic tone of voice, Zuko guessed he said the last words more to the dragon than anyone else.

The Prince knew it was only a matter of moments before the entire waterbending class would arrive on the scene, and they might jump to all the wrong conclusions, but he still didn't let go. This spirit was trouble, and if he was here, it could mean nothing good for the Water Tribe.

There was a hint of urgency in the creature's next words: "If you even consider telling the Tribe who I really am, rest assured, I will repay you in kind, for I'm not the only uninvited intruder hiding

among their midst. Which do you think they would find more threatening: a troublesome spirit, or the Prince of Fire Nation?"

The shouts around them got louder.

"Or", Nakki spoke evenly and looked Zuko steadily in the eye, "you let me go, we call this an honest mistake, and no one here needs to be the wiser about who either of us really are."

Zuko's yellow, unblinking eyes revealed nothing of what he was thinking. The water spirit glanced at the direction, where the sounds were coming from, licked his lips, and spoke fast: "This looks bad, I know, but I'm really not as awful as you think. We don't have to be enemies. We have more in common than you know. We could help each other."

"What's going on here?" An annoyed, sarcastic voice asked over the hum of the crowd.

Master Pakku is here. Time's up.

Nakki leaned in to whisper urgently: "Zhao has a secret that he thinks no one else knows. It is to do with the invasion. Meet me at midnight tonight under the Gray Bridge over the Northern Canal, and I will tell you what it is."

Nakki leaned a little away to look Zuko in the eye, barely mouthing his next words: "You are undoubtedly thinking 'why should I trust this creep?' Three reasons: first, if you let me go, I won't out your secret and ruin your little undercover operation; second, we both know I can't defeat you in battle, so you have little to fear from me; and, third, and most importantly, because the information I have could potentially save thousands of lives. Look around you. They may not know it yet, but this place will go to hell in a hand basket soon, with or without _my_ involvement. The question you should be asking yourself is: 'what have I really got to lose?'"

Zuko stared at Nakki, although he knew better than to think he could tell if the guy was lying or not.

"...you don't let that boy go right now, I will..." Pakku said. He sounded unconcerned, but there was a distinct threat behind the words.

Abruptly, Zuko got up, and stepped off of 'Taro'. Most people staggered back, but Pakku stood his ground, looking unimpressed and most unamused. Zuko knew there was no way the old man could've heard what transpired between them, but, somehow, the waterbending master looked suspicious under his usual calm demeanor.

"Are you alright?" Aang asked in his innocent, curious tone, and offered a hand to the downed man. Katara frowned thoughtfully, and looked at Zuko.

The water spirit, still in the shape of a young water tribe warrior, took the offered hand gratefully, got up quickly, and flashed a confident smile at the people around him. "I'm fine. I wasn't scared. At all. Just playing along."

Nakki's voice sounded again much more like what you'd expect from a startled, young man, his tone conveying he was still slightly worried, but mostly okay, and trying to appear calmer than he really was, to save his ego.

Pakku nodded, very slowly. "Well, then, thank you for waisting my time. Students, back to the arena at once. That is, if you aren't too tired of failing already."

Pakku's students started to move out. The old master turned to address the rest of the crowd. "Have you nowhere better to be, and nothing better to do, than watch children play?"

Slowly, the murmuring crowd parted, going back to minding their own business, though many threw weary glances Zuko's way. Soon, there was only Aang, Sokka, Katara, 'Taro', and Zuko present.

"I am so sorry", Sokka turned to 'Taro' as soon as all outsiders were out of earshot. "He really doesn't usually..."

"No, it's fine", 'Taro' answered, noticeably more tense than before, but smiling regardless. "My fault, really. That's just me: making enemies when I should be making friends." The spirit looked straight at Zuko when saying that, and then turned back to Sokka. "But oh, look how late it is. I really should get going."

"Well, if you are sure you're okay..." Katara started to say hesitantly, glancing at Aang, who looked just as confused.

"I'm peachy. And, Sokka, the stuff I said about your..." A worried glance at Katara. "The stuff I said earlier. You know that was all in good humor, right? That I didn't _really_ mean anything by it."

Zuko was, frankly, a bit surprised Nakki hadn't outed him _anyway_. He had to give it to the spirit: Nakki could hold on to a story, even when his cover was under scrutiny. _Playing it to the hilt, even._

"Sure", Sokka drawled out, though he still looked dubiously between Zuko and 'Taro'.

"So, we are good, right?" 'Taro' made sure. "You, and me, and your dragon?"

"Yeah, we're totally cool. Look, what did Kulo exactly say to you when...?"

"Gotta go, but see you later!"

The disguised spirit nodded a farewell to everyone in the group, glanced at Zuko one final time, mouthed 'come as human', and was out of sight at a speed that would've impressed anyone who had never seen Aang run.

Katara turned to Sokka, hands crossed over her chest. "What â€" happened?"

"Nothing bad or serious, I swear", Sokka assured her. For some reason, he was still willing to defend Zuko, it would seem. Katara raised one dubious eyebrow.

"Really, it's fine", Sokka gestured, and smiled brighter. "Believe it or not, Kulo was just defending your honor."

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Something about the picture doesn't add up.

'A trap' was the first word that came to mind when Zuko thought of his mysterious midnight meeting. It was still at least an hour before the set time, and Zuko was waiting restlessly in the "stable" house? - the children had made for him. The large igloo that was made by two talented, but novice waterbenders, wasn't a work of art, but the walls were solid, the entrance big enough to accommodate him, it protected him from the arctic wind, and, most importantly, afforded him some amount of privacy, so Zuko wasn't complaining.

Zuko could always _not go _to the meeting, but there didn't seem to be a good enough reason not to.

_Other than that Nakki is probably setting up a trap for me right now, or, perhaps even more likely, miles away. _

As much as Nakki had claimed he wasn't a threat, Zuko knew better than to trust a word that came out of his past assailant's mouth. However, if there was even a tiny chance the spirit really could, and would, help Zuko stop the invasion, the Prince had to try. Besides, this wasn't the most dangerous thing he'd ever done, nor the most desperate thing he would do to reach his goal.

Zuko peeked out from behind the wooden door of the igloo, decided it was almost time, and pulled back inside. Although he was pretty sure Uncle would've advised against it, Zuko intended to go to the meeting in his human form. If someone saw a stranger sneaking around, he would be in a lot of trouble, and that might be exactly what the spirit was planning, but Zuko just couldn't think of a plausible way to go to a secret meeting as a dragon without someone noticing him. The risk was too high. Also, as much as being a dragon had its merits, Zuko missed his human body.

Zuko concentrated, breathing in and out slowly. For a moment, he feared he couldn't change back, but fortunately, moments later, he was engulfed by flames. His next worry was that the multi-colored fire would melt the igloo, but thankfully it wasn't as hot as ordinary fire.

Before moving out, Zuko checked that all the belongings he had brought with him were accounted for. The Prince had no idea where his clothes and things went when he transformed, but since they came back when he returned to his human shape, Zuko had decided to make the most of it. He had brought rope, ice spikes for climbing, and his Dao swords, which had thankfully been still with his ostrich horse when the ship was blown up.

Shara had provided Zuko with a multi-layered, mostly silken, all-white getup, which Zuko was now grateful for. It was warm, durable, and the camouflage combined with Zuko's ninja training and knowledge of the city would seriously improve his odds of not getting spotted.

Leaving the igloo was the most crucial part. If he was seen exiting Kulo's place of rest, someone might draw the conclusion that Kulo was involved and couldn't be trusted. If Zuko was caught at any other time, he might still be able to make a run for it, hide, and resume his dragon shape.

Reluctant to take risks, Zuko used his firebending to see if there were any human-sized heat signatures in the vicinity. Scouting with firebending wasn't Zuko's area of expertise, but he was relatively sure that any living thing would stand out particularly well next to the icy walls and chilling air.

Once Zuko was certain no one was close, which lessened, if not entirely removed the risk of being seen, he walked out of the building. Although the entrance was relatively small for a dragon(to preserve more heat inside), human Zuko didn't need to so much as crouch to get out.

Zuko quickly made his way to the shadow of another, larger building. Although it was close to midnight, the nearly full moon cast dark shadows on the snow, and Zuko tried to stick to them whenever possible.

After just few minutes, Zuko could hear people coming his way. He climbed to a roof, which was something he'd been tempted to do from the start, but had avoided thus far for the fear of being seen by someone from the palace towering high above the rest of the city.

Zuko had expected guards on patrol, but was instead passed by a group of teenagers. From their giggles, the Prince guessed they weren't supposed to be out this late. It was nice to see that some things were the same everywhere, even among the Water Tribes, who were usually thought to be all about purity and virtue.

In fact, during the whole walk, Zuko encountered surprisingly few guards. It wasn't like there were no guards at all, but he had expected the city to be on high alert what with the invasion on its way. Though, maybe the biggest invasion fleet of all time couldn't exactly sneak up on anyone, and, in the meanwhile, the Tribe had no reason to think the enemy had a man inside.

Zuko figured he could've tried to blend in and walk normally, like the teenagers he'd seen earlier, and hope no one realized he was an outsider. Still, Zuko feared his clothes, scar, or the late hour might draw attention. Despite its size, the Capital had that small village feel to it. Meaning that everyone knew everyone else's business, and they might realize Zuko was a new face. If he was caught, he could try to claim he had arrived to the city only recently, like so many, but even that alibi was unlikely to hold under scrutiny, so shadows would have to do.

Speaking of disguises in small towns, who was Nakki portraying earlier?

It wasn't unlike of the spirit to assume the shape of a known individual of the community, so maybe the spirit had done that, and trusted he wouldn't run into the real Taro while at it. Still, if someone who knew Taro heard of what had happened and asked him about it, Nakki could be in trouble. It was more likely he had chosen the

appearance of someone who was new in town, and not yet known by many.

Zuko doubted the boy Nakki had been portraying was actually a member of Sokka's warrior training class. The spirit surely couldn't keep up the pretense well enough to enroll, and if he took the shape of someone who was originally on the class, the next time the real Taro and Sokka met, Sokka would know something really weird was going on.

Zuko didn't think Nakki would reveal his presence through a rookie mistake like that, nor did the spirit seem cruel enough to kill the person he was impersonating just to avoid detection. If Nakki had done that when he was pretending to be Sergeant Jiri, it would've taken Zuko a lot longer to find the culprit. And Nakki probably could've, quite easily, just slit somebody's throat and toss him over the railing. Not many would've been on alert for an attack while the ship was in the middle of the ocean.

As much as it shamed Zuko to admit it, if Nakki had covered his track better on their first encounter, it might have taken Zuko weeks, if not even longer, to realize there was a shapeshifter among his crew. Thankfully, it seemed that, whatever the water spirit's priorities were, maintaining his cover for as long as possible, wasn't Nakki's number one concern.

Which, of course, lead to the question: why had Nakki been so worried about being found out today? Did he still have some business here that he couldn't finish if people knew of his presence, or was there perhaps bad blood between him and the Northern Water Tribe?

Zuko reached the Northern Canal without incidence. The Gray Bridge was the one furthest up the hill, so it was still a bit of a walk from there. Zuko hadn't been to this part of the town before, so he stuck close to the waterway.

In the water, Zuko could see his own reflection, and was a little surprised by his battered state. He hadn't forgotten that he had nearly died in an explosion less than a week ago, but a part of him had expected the cuts and bruises to have healed already.

Apparently, dragon powers don't include inhuman recovery rate. Good to know.

Zuko walked carefully, even though this part of the town was spectacularly out of the way, and completely devoid of late-night walkers. He wondered that, if Nakki did show up, would he come as Taro or as himself?

Now that Zuko was thinking about it, the guy Nakki had been impersonating earlier, probably wasn't even called Taro. That name had been Sokka's guess.

Sokka was a smart guy, though. He would eventually realize something was amiss, either when the kid his dragon had tackled didn't show up in training again, or he might even realize that no such person had ever attended. Still, as clever as Sokka could sometimes be, Zuko doubted he could guess what had really taken place. A shapeshifter just wasn't the most common or simplest explanation. Not unless the

Avatar's lot had had their own run-in with Nakki in the past.

Which... wouldn't be all that hard to picture. Nakki even made that comment about Katara's temperament. I wonder if he was talking from experience...

Zuko had originally presumed Nakki was here for him, but it was quite possible he was after the Avatar, instead. Or perhaps Sokka or Katara, since they were the ones the spirit had shown most interest in. That might explain why Nakki had been so reluctant to be found out by anyone other than Zuko. Maybe the game was still on.

What are you really up to? And, most importantly, why?

There was a contradiction between what Nakki said and what he did. On their first encounter, Nakki had made a big show of being his enemy. Why? Wouldn't it have been more useful to pretend to be his friend, and then stab him in the back? Why give Zuko a warning shot? Nakki had done him great damage in sabotaging his ship, but he could've easily done more than just tinker with the engine.

Also, when Zuko had faced Tuli about the matter, she had seemed less than concerned. Zuko had presumed she just didn't show worry easily, but perhaps she knew more than he did. All in all, Nakki didn't appear to be nearly as dangerous or uncaring of consequences as he wanted people to think he was. Zuko sincerely hoped he was right in thinking Nakki's bark was worse than his bite, since it was one of the main reasons he had agreed to this meeting.

"You are late."

Zuko turned to face a shadowy alley between two tall warehouse buildings, but saw no one. He could see the Gray Bridge still some distance away, but, apparently, he would need to go no further. Zuko stepped into the alley.

The thing he saw first was a set of sharp teeth smiling at him. Soon, the entire spirit emerged from the shadows. "Didn't think I would show up, did you?"

Zuko was actually pretty surprised Nakki hadn't bailed on him, though, perhaps, he shouldn't be. Zuko had a feeling words were Nakki's strongest suit, so, from that point of view, it made sense for him to want to face Zuko in the innocuous form of a friendly chat. The Prince could only hope his prior encounters with Tuli had prepared him to deal with the enigmatic water spirit.

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A/N

Sorry about the long wait between chapters. There was quite a bit of stuff I had to do during the holidays. At least this is one of the longest chapters yet, and the next one should hopefully be up faster (because I can't wait to get to it).

I got quite a bit of reviews about the name Kulo, both for and against, and I thank you all for your opinions and tips. As you can

see, I have decided to keep it. I was happily surprised that, in Japanese, kuro means black, even if culo in Spanish isn't as appropriate. Thank you for all the other reviews, favorites and alerts as well!

32. Best Laid Plans of Spirits and Men

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Nakki was just as tall and intimidating as Zuko had remembered. Moonlight reflected off of his semi-translucent skin, somehow creating the illusion of being under water. This time, Nakki's long, black dreadlocks were tied loosely behind his head, and the spirit was wearing dark blue trousers and a matching tunic, both of which looked far too thin to be worn in these temperatures. No shoes.

Nakki smiled curiously, but was obviously waiting for Zuko to say something first. The Prince decided to cut to the chase: "What do you want from me?"

"What makes you think I want anything from you?" Nakki asked, frowning in thought. He sounded serious, but was probably just stalling to annoy Zuko. If the spirit decided to argue over every phrasing, they would be here all night. Somehow, though, unlike with Tuli, Zuko had a distinct impression that Nakki was stalling on purpose; to test him, rather than because he didn't understand Zuko's strange, human ways.

Instead of getting annoyed, Zuko decided to respond with logic. Outarguing spirits tended to work better than shouting at them. "When we met for the first time, you said the Avatar was a bore, and that I am much more interesting. You also said we would meet again. So, it is logical to presume it's me you have followed all the way here, which means you definitely want something from me."

On that moment, Zuko figured out something else that had been bothering him tonight. "Earlier today, when I recognized you... You let me catch you on purpose, didn't you? You arranged the whole scene to lure me into this meeting. You weren't really afraid of being found out, but only pretended to be, to make me think I knew something you valued, so that I would think I held power over you. You have gone through a lot of trouble to bring me here, and here I am. Now what?"

Nakki's eyes widened a fraction. When he spoke, Zuko thought he could hear a hint of appreciation in his tone: "You are more clever than I gave you credit for. And yet, here you are. I dare say, you and I will get along just fine."

Zuko wasn't sure if Nakki was being ironical or if he should be offended, but eventually he decided the spirit appeared to be serious. Zuko sighed. "I've had a lot of practice, growing up with a sister whose greatest delight was playing games at other people's expense. The sort of games she would always win. You sort of remind me of her. But now, get to the point. Why are we here, really?"

Unspoken between them, but understood by both, were the words: You

tricked me here, without me knowing the first thing about why. Should I be worried?_

Nakki smiled encouragingly. "Believe what you may, but I wasn't kidding when I asked you to come here to hear a tale I have to tell. Should you decide to believe my story, then we might be able to work together in the future to further our common interests."

"So you're here to tell me a story?" Zuko asked, finding the phrasing less than promising. "But not the truth?"

"Only people who believe blindly are arrogant enough to think they know the truth. I'm certainly not one of them, but, if the matter bothers you so, I can promise to tell you the story as truthfully as I am able. I should warn you, though, quite a bit of it is based on hearsay and speculation, so I cannot guarantee it is all true. Would that be acceptable to you?"

Zuko considered. He had come this far, so it would be ridiculous to turn back without hearing Nakki out, but, on the other hand, the Prince had a feeling Nakki's tale would serve some other purpose than just informing him of... things. Once already Zuko had agreed to an exchange of favors with a spirit without considering the consequences, and, although he did not regret the deal he had made with Tuli, he would also be a fool to fall into the same trap twice. "Couldn't you just tell me Zhao's secret, and be done with it?"

"I could, but it is often better to start from the beginning. The story will make more sense, and be more believable, if I first tell you how I came by this information."

Just because Zuko's hunch told him Nakki had a hidden agenda in telling him all this, didn't necessarily mean the information would be false. You could sort of rely on unreliable people to have a hidden motivation, and after you learned what it was, you could look at the information they had given to you from that angle, and then draw your own conclusions on how much of it might be true.

Zuko figured he would lose little by hearing out Nakki's tale, so he nodded.

"This is a story of spirits, secrets, and, most of all, callousness. The story began a long time ago. After the first humans had learned to waterbend, the Moon and the Ocean decided to leave the Spirit Realm, and come live in the physical world instead. Don't ask me why they did it, for I do not know. No one does. An interesting aspect of this relocation is that almost none, human and spirit alike, know where the Moon and the Ocean went, or what shape they took, and nothing has been heard of them since, so their current whereabouts are a mystery to date."

"When you say you start from the beginning, you really mean it, don't you?" Zuko crossed his arms and huffed.

"Every waterbender has heard this story, but since you are not from around, I did not want to presume you had. But, on with the story: there is one spirit old enough to remember what became of the Moon and the Ocean. His name is Koh the Face Stealer, and as one of the oldest and most knowledgeable spirits, Koh is more or less the go-to guy on long forgotten secrets. It is a commonly acknowledged

presumption among spirits that he alone knows the true location of the Ocean and the Moon.

"During the millennia, many have ventured into Koh's cave in the roots of a dying tree, looking for answers to some profound questions in life, but although Koh is bound by oath to answer their questions, not many have walked away with precious knowledge. The Face Stealer, like his name suggests, will steal any face that shows any emotion in his presence, and thus many secrets are safe with him."

Zuko felt like pinching the bridge of his nose, but he didn't want to let Nakki out of his sight. The practiced way in which the spirit was telling his story made Zuko suspect there was a storytelling culture, a routine, behind the words. The telling was consistent, but also calculated. Although this kind of information on the spirit world (if it was true) could turn out to be useful to Zuko later, the Prince tried to look as unimpressed as possible to make Nakki hurry with the story, and possibly tell the tale differently, and reveal more than the spirit had originally intended. It was a long shot, sure, but it never hurt to try.

"Let me guess: you have such a phenomenal poker face that you decided to go and face the Face Stealer, and returned victorious. I still don't see what all this has to do with Zhao, though."

If Nakki was angered by Zuko's dubious attitude, it didn't show. Quite possibly, the spirit was used to people disbelieving his tales.

"Koh and I have met. Once. I think he thought us carved out of the same wood, since we both like riddles, change faces like others change shirts, and are somewhat... amoral. Though, from a human point of view, most spirits lack a sense of right and wrong. However, although Koh and I have both taken an unusually great interest in the affairs of the physical world, we soon realized we didn't really see eye to eye on anything else, and parted ways quickly."

"Us not getting along might have had something to do with him seeing me as a potential lackey, whereas I, well, let's just say I have problems with authorities. The most important reason for our distaste for one another was, undoubtedly, our fundamental differences in opinion, for the difference between him and me is as great as the difference between stealing faces and borrowing them."

For a moment, Nakki looked like he was lost in memory. Without his usual, carefully placed mask of indifference or cruel amusement, he looked surprisingly scared and vulnerable; almost human, despite his ethereal skin, sharp teeth, and angular facial features.

The relapse was only momentary, as the spirit resumed his usual nonchalant attitude, but, presuming Nakki wasn't just messing with him and was genuinely upset by memories related to the Face Stealer, it did make Zuko wonder, what had really taken place between Nakki and Koh. If the two were enemies, it might explain why the river spirit was so eager to share information with Zuko. Being used as a pawn in a game between two spirits really wasn't the worst possible reason why Nakki was being so nice to him all of a sudden, but Zuko decided to refrain from making presumptions. Too early for that.

Nakki noticed Zuko sizing him up, and continued speaking: "But, I digress, for how I feel about Koh isn't important to this story. What is important, on the other hand, is that some odd thousand years ago, Koh wrote a scroll. This is a noteworthy occasion, for the Face Stealer is not known for parting with information of his own free will too often. Not without a price, anyway.

"Not many know of Koh's secret scroll's existence, and of those few, only one has ever seen what the scroll holds. That one is the Knowledge Spirit, Wan Shi Tong, and this is the part where Zhao comes in. There are many speculations on what untold secrets Koh's scroll imparts with, the most common being that it describes some of the first waterbending katas; moves of incredible power, or so it is believed. Since it is a known fact that Wan Shi Tong is interested in all styles of waterbending, the theory certainly has some merit. However, my own theory is that the scroll reveals the whereabouts of the Ocean and the Moon.

"This is only a theory, since I have never seen the scroll in person. Wan Shi Tong keeps it in his library, here, in the physical world, where spirits do not often venture. I should, perhaps, explain that most spirits are nowhere near as curious beings as humans are. Uncovering secrets just because it would be an interesting pastime just does not happen. That is probably the reason why the Knowledge Spirit chose to locate his vast treasure trove of knowledge here in the first place, and open his doors to humans, hoping they would appreciate his contribution more than the spirits do.

"There is something you should know about Wan Shi Tong. He appreciates knowledge more than anything else, and sometimes even prides himself as being all-knowing. But he doesn't much care what people do with the knowledge he has put on display for anyone to see. His calling is to collect, preserve, and spread knowledge, heedless of consequences. Although, after a certain firebender destroyed an entire section of his library, in an attempt to eradicate information that could be used to hurt the Fire Nation, the Owl Spirit has been considerably more skiffish about letting humans into his precious library. These days, he focuses primarily on hoarding information rather than sharing it. I think, he is finally starting to see that the most common reason people have for seeking knowledge is the wish to wage war more effectively."

Zuko narrowed his eyes. "And that firebender was Zhao." It was more a statement than a question, really.

"So I have heard. Rumor also has it that, ever since his visit to Wan Shi Tong's library, all those years ago, Zhao has boasted he does not fear the spirits. I think this is not just because he was able to fool He-who-knows-ten-thousand-things. My theory is that Zhao has read Koh's scroll, and knows the long-forgotten location of the Ocean and the Moon, and that our dear Admiral intends to exploit this information to defeat the Northern Water Tribe."

Sounds like everyone has a secret plan but me. Great.

Nakki remained quiet after that, though he was smiling victoriously like a cat-hawk that had just brought a dead rodent to his owner, obviously expecting praise for a job well done.

Zuko frowned. Nakki had to be leaving something out. "That's all? You

went through the trouble of finding me, and getting me to come to your secret meeting, to tell me a mixture of legend and rumor, with very few useful suggestions?"

Nakki's smile lessened considerably, and when he spoke, he sounded quite offended under his usual laughter. "I'm not sure you grasp the significance of this information. If something should happen to the spirits, the repercussions would be massive. They would affect the physical world and spirit world, alike. Whatever Zhao's plans regarding the spirits may be, if there is even the slightest change that the Moon, the Ocean, or quite possibly both, will be put in mortal danger, someone must stop Zhao."

Zuko frowned. "Surely, not even Zhao could be so dumb as to play around with that kind of stakes."

"Surely, you say, but how sure are you, really?"

_Not as sure as I'd like to be. Certainly not sure enough to ignore this. _Zuko could see Nakki's point now. "Very well. I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. That said, what's your angle? Why are you handing out spirit secrets so freely?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm not sure what would happen, if one of the more powerful spirits of the universe died, but I cannot imagine it would be anything pleasant. For any of us."

"Still. You could have just told me that important spirits are in danger. Instead, you parted with a long and detailed story. Every other spirit I have met has been skittish at best when it comes to answering direct questions. It makes one wonder, what is the price on your sudden helpfulness."

Nakki smiled to himself, like laughing at a joke only he could hear. "You are not entirely _wrong_ in thinking that I had another reason in telling you all this. First, though, you should perhaps know that I am not particularly rule-abiding, or loyal to other spirits. I have no moral scruples over snitching on my colleagues."

"Also, if I dupe you into intervening, I should probably also give you the heads up by naming, which spirits' toes you'll be stepping on in the process. Most spirits have no opinion on you, one way or another, just like most spirits have no strong opinion on humankind, particularly, but there are some that fear you will meddle with their plans, and will be most displeased if you do."

"And _you_ are different from these other spirits who mean me harm, how, exactly?" Zuko challenged, lifting an eyebrow.

Nakki humphed. "It is not me you should be worried about. I am small game. You could think of me more as your informant on the matters of the spirit world, and one of the very few spirits you can trust."

"I don't trust you."

"And I was not confused into thinking you did. I was talking hypothetically. See, the reason you shouldn't trust most spirits is that most spirits don't want the same things you do. They don't care about your life, the lives of your people, or the human race. Most spirits only care about their own, niche areas of interest, usually a

particular place or happening. The only opinion they have on humans is that they like humans who look after their special place or event, and hate humans who work against it, whether unwittingly or on purpose. That does create a considerable conflict of interest between you and most of spirit kind, wouldn't you say?"

"But not with you?" Zuko asked dubiously. "I get what you're saying: I should trust you, because you, unlike most spirits, aren't indifferent to humans. Which is true. The first time we met, you yourself said you didn't care for people. Am I now supposed to believe you've changed your mind?"

Nakki smiled. "I remember that conversation very well. Perhaps I should remind you that, my exact words were, more or less: 'I care equally little for people of fire and water alike.' So, I only said I felt equal amount of concern for people from both nations, which really is the same thing as saying I care equally lot for people from both nations. I certainly did not claim not to care about people at all. The reality of the matter is that I think people are curious and lively beings, and I adore them for it. However, I could not tell you so then and there. Wrong spirits might have been listening, and might have taken offense."

"Like who? Koh? Wan Shi Tong? The spirits who don't care about humanity."

"The spirits who are indifferent to humanity, are not the real problem. The ones who want to save the world, are the ones you should really be worried about."

"You just like sounding cryptic, don't you?"

Nakki smiled lopsidedly, though Zuko could tell he was tiring. "There are spirits who want to save the world, and there are spirits who want to save humankind, and I assure you, the difference is more than just rhetorics. Or need I remind you that the human race is mostly responsible for the turmoil and unbalance that has plagued the physical world, and, in extension, the Spirit World, for a hundred years now? If you were a spirit who cares about the realm of the living and wishes to restore balance, wouldn't your next logical step be to wipe out mankind?"

Zuko straightened himself. "Why all of mankind? Surely they cannot hold everyone responsible for hundred-year-old crimes?"

"The spirits, apart from the World Spirit, don't often make much distinction between different people's of the world. Prince Zuko, a word of advice: when you are dealing with spirits, be wary of any spirit that claims to want to save the world, for that is an unusually strong opinion for a spirit to have, and never presume they care about preserving humans unless they specifically tell you they do. Keep in mind that, although most spirits do not wish all of humanity wiped out, they also have not lifted a finger when humanity has been trying to wipe itself out."

"Let me guess: Wan Shi Tong and Koh fall to the category of spirits who want to save the world, and that is why you told me this story?"

Nakki nodded. "Sort of. Wan Shi Tong is antisocial at best, and

considers humankind his enemy at worst, but it is Koh you should truly be worried about. Many spirits mistakenly think Koh to be vain, and only interested in widening his morbid collection, but never forget he is clever, interested in affairs of men, and always has a reason for the things he does. It is no wonder that, although Koh rarely leaves his hideout, he is still remembered and feared by humans. Spirits who meddle with humans, and even Avatars, are always feared, and even hated. I should know."

"Koh gave that scroll to Wan Shi Tong on purpose, knowing the cavalier Knowledge Spirit would never refuse a new addition to his collection, no matter how dangerous the information it held. Koh meant for the scroll to be found by a human, as a way to promote the end of humankind without playing too obvious a role in it. Because if there is one rule among spirits, it is that we should not meddle too much in the affairs of the physical world in matters that are none of our business, or in pursuit of personal agendas. If one spirit is too active, the others will get jealous and intervene. That is why those of us who love to meddle need to go about it in a roundabout way."

Zuko huffed. "I wouldn't call arranging a secret midnight meeting to share information with a human a very subtle way of influencing the physical world."

Nakki laughed. "True. That is why I needed to make sure it was a surprising move to you, and anyone else who might be watching. You see, if there is one thing I am especially good at, it is exploiting loopholes. I am not even sure if you knew this, but I am supposed to be a small-time river spirit. However, do you see any rivers around? And yet, here I am."

Zuko had wondered about Nakki's flexible relocations earlier, and had already figured what was the likely reason. "Water moves in a cycle."

"Exactly!" Nakki said, appearing truly delighted Zuko was following his train of thought. "Originally, when in the physical world, I was supposed to be limited only to rivers or close to them, and could only wander on dry land as far as the spring floods reached every year. However, why should the same water that runs through rivers suddenly become poison to me, when it reaches ocean? There are currents in the ocean as well, and under ground, and even inside glaciers. And rainwater, or melting snow from snowcapped peaks? Are these not the things rivers are made of?"

Zuko was surprised that Nakki would fall into the traditional trap of boasting about his powers, while, at the same time, revealing his limitations, but the Prince had nothing particularly against this turn of conversation. On the contrary. "Are you trying to say that you can draw power from any water? And the other spirits are okay with this, although you are stepping on their territory?"

"Well, no. I cannot draw strength from just any water. Though I am at my strongest while in my natural habitat. The loopholes have merely allowed me flexibility when it comes to traveling around the physical world. The other spirits don't have to like it, but they can not intervene, because I am a river spirit; water is always looking for the path of least resistance, and rivers affect their surrounding areas, and sometimes even relocate altogether, so, a certain amount

of flexibility is in my nature.

"What truly limits spirits is their own, limited personality and lack of imagination. Humans are bound by morality and honor, whereas spirits are bound by rules. Unlike humans, who can forge their own destinies, spirits are expected to behave a certain way that represents their limited area of expertise. However, so long as I can defend my deeds by calling them a part of my essence, I am not, technically, breaking any rules.

"After I finally found a way to bend the rules, it has mostly been a matter of getting other spirits and humans accustomed to my behavior. When I first started meddling in human affairs, the other spirits were not happy about it. However, my actions were so random that there appeared to be no particular agenda I was after, other than keeping people on their toes, like a good river spirit ought to. To remind humans to be humble when faced with the unpredictable and deadly forces of nature. Since then, the others have grown quite accustomed to my erratic behavior, shrugging it off as 'such a Nakki thing to do'.

"This is also, in part, the reason why I don't correct people when they call me a water spirit, which is actually a general category for a whole bunch of spirits, or if they call me a trickster spirit; those definitions, even if vague or even incorrect, leave me with more room to maneuver in, while staying within people's presumptions of what a spirit like me should do. You might even say that the greatest trick I ever played on the world was making them think inconsequential tricks is all I am capable of. Or interested in."

Zuko nodded. "So long as the pattern behind your deeds is too complicated to be identified, you can do just about anything without angering the other spirits."

_But why are you telling _me_ all this?_

"Exactly. So long as I do not do anything too big, But, how could I, anyway? I am not particularly powerful, as spirits go. Even when I have information that others do not, it does little good to me if I don't have the power to act upon it. Hence, I am looking for allies, which brings us to our meeting.

"Even if I help you, no spirit can accuse me of showing favoritism to you. Not after I have attacked you not once but twice. I have also helped Zhao in the past, so would it not be hilariously inconsistent of me to side with you against the Admiral next?"

Zuko narrowed his eyes. "Twice?"

Nakki shrugged. "You were bound to find out about my involvement in the destruction of your ship _eventually_, so it is perhaps better we get it out of the..."

In one quick motion, Zuko pushed Nakki against the ice wall of the alley, created a fire dagger, and placed it against Nakki's throat. "Give me one good reason", the Prince stated in a surprisingly even voice.

The spirit gulped for air, quickly saying: "If we can put the..."

unfortunate mistakes of the past behind us, I will help you stop the invasion."

Zuko was dead serious. "You nearly killed me."

"Exactly. Nearly. And with fire, of all things. Dragons are almost impervious to heat. You can fly and you can swim; I figured your odds were all right."

"You know that you haven't given me any reason to think you won't try to kill me again the moment I turn my back on you", Zuko pointed out, and placed the dagger a little closer to Nakki's throat. This spirit sure liked the sound of his own voice, but if he knew what was good for him, he would try make his point with fewer words.

Nakki looked slightly worried, but then again he had looked worried earlier that day, too, and that had been an act. Zuko did not presume to have the upper hand here. This guy could be slick.

I should just get rid of him right here and now.

But Zuko knew he wouldn't. Despite his anger, despite that he knew he was likely to pay dearly for his soft-heartedness, Zuko sighed and backed down, dissipating the fire.

There was little point in making threats that were not credible, not when both probably recognized them for the cheap talk they were. The only thing to be gained from further shows of aggression would be the fire from the dagger bringing unwanted attention raining down on them.

He would not kill Nakki tonight, and not just because he wasn't sure spirits could be killed.

Well, if the Moon and Ocean can be, maybe all spirits are vulnerable in this world. That is something to consider later.

Nakki rubbed his throat absently, looking quite thoughtful. Eventually he opened his mouth, closed it again, then finally looked Zuko in the eye and said: "I may have had that coming."

"_You think?_"

Nakki nodded once, the irony apparently lost on him.

Zuko sighed: "You... You blew up my ship. My _ship_. Even if you weren't trying to kill me (and that is a big if), it is still something I cannot just put behind me."

Nakki looked up again. "Oh."

Zuko was a little dubious at the emotionless surprise in Nakki's voice. There was no way this guy was this clueless. Still, Zuko would put it plainly: "I cannot trust you and I most certainly have no intentions of working with you. If you know what is good for you, you will leave right now, and you will leave me and the people I care about alone."

Nakki bit his lip. "But..."

"No buts." Zuko's temper was only just under control.

"But", Nakki went on anyway, "would it not be better if I told you why I am so interested in all this? What my angle is?"

"No", Zuko said, exasperated, "That would not be enough."

Nakki was quiet for a while. "But I told you so much. And all true (and that is unusual for me)."

Zuko just stared. Words weren't his strongest suit, but maybe his scary dragon stare worked on spirits as well as men.

Nakki turned around, but wasn't apparently done talking. "You will think about my offer." He sounded as if there was no question about it. "You need not agree to anything right now, for my offer stands for as long as there is anything either of us can do to stop the invasion."

"What could you do to stop the invasion?" Zuko asked. He just wanted to make sure the spirit wasn't bluffing.

Nakki looked at him again. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Not alone I can. That is why I am on the lookout for allies."

Zuko still couldn't make heads or tails about his assailant. Frustrated, he asked: "Why? Why would you want to help?"

For the first time during the whole conversation, Nakki looked taken aback by a question, and also appeared to truly be weighing his answer. Eventually the spirit said: "I am complicated. More complicated than you know. Suffices to say I have my reasons, and I feel strongly about this."

"Which side are you on? Really?"

Nakki smiled winsomely at that: "Why, on the side of humanity, of course."

Zuko opened his mouth to protest, but Nakki wasn't done talking: "You will think about my offer. If you think of some way to stop an armada on your own, you will do that, but if you can think of something... anything I could be of assistance with, don't hesitate to ask."

Nakki was already leaving, rather sliding than walking away, when Zuko begrudgingly added: "I don't know how to contact you."

Nakki smiled brightly, and Zuko held up a finger: "No. This does not mean that I am considering your offer. Just... You seem to always know where I am, but how do I find you?"

The spirit looked up: "Well, I will be here and there, but around, nonetheless, waiting for the invasion. I will be keeping an eye on you, so maybe I'll just stop by for a chat."

Zuko shook his head. "I cannot have you drawing suspicion to... to Kulo."

"Don't worry. I can be sneaky", the water spirit assured him, but Zuko wasn't convinced. He had a feeling Nakki overestimated his own

subtleness constantly. Just because people didn't notice a spirit staring them in the face didn't mean Nakki was the sneakiest person of all time. Subtle only when compared to other spirits.

Zuko thought about repeating his demand that Nakki stay away, but was certain the spirit would take his order as advice at best, and would come anyway. And since Nakki was keeping an eye on him, Zuko would rather keep an eye on the spirit right back.

Zuko watched keenly at the tall being walking away. Against Zuko's expectations, Nakki did not disappear in a puff of smoke. Instead the retreating form of the water spirit gradually disappeared into the distance, and eventually behind a building.

Zuko sighed. He had a bad feeling about this. Granted, a sense of foreboding had become a constant companion for him ever since he'd learned of the plans to conquer the Northern Tribe, but this latest turn of events was doing nothing to alleviate his worry. There were far too many men and spirits alike taking an interest in him and in this invasion. With so many people meddling, there was no way this could all end well.

Zuko knew he should head back to his building, but should he do so as a dragon or a human? He had snuck this far on foot, and it was good to practice his ninja skills. Also, no one had seen Kulo leave his igloo to begin with, and they might not take well to having the friendly dragon sneaking around after dark.

On the other hand, he might get home safer and faster via air.

Home.

Zuko stopped in his tracks. He could hardly believe his own slip-up. _Home is a faraway, unreachable place. This is just a location I am staying in, and it could hardly be a further thing from home._

Zuko decided to walk, mostly because the transformation itself was so damn flashy. He had gotten this far and had no intentions of blowing up his cover now. Unlike Nakki, Zuko couldn't just invent a new one at every turn. He was only Zuko and Kulo and the Blue Spirit... Okay, maybe he wasn't really proving his point here, but whatever.

Zuko couldn't solve all his problems by inventing a new secret identity.

He made his way slowly and carefully, sticking to the shadows and the roofs, although he probably could have just walked down the streets. There were even fewer people around now than what there had been on the way here. It was unnerving that despite being somewhat a metropolitan, the Capital of the Water Tribe had less guards patrolling its streets than most Earth Kingdom towns he'd been to. Living in such isolation, the locals couldn't even consider the possibility of intruders.

At least making his way back slowly gave Zuko a chance to reflect on his situation. He had seriously hoped that whatever information the water spirit provided, it would help him put together a plan. An actual plan, not just a I'll-fly-there-and-see-how-it-goes plan.

Nakki's information had made it clear that the stakes were even higher than Zuko had realized, but other than that, the secret meeting had been pretty useless to him.

Looked like Zuko was on his own on this one.

Option one: Kill Zhao.

Despite Zuko's ninja training, he wasn't a big fan of assassination. Although it was sometimes necessary, it was certainly not the most fair or honorable way to go about defeating your enemy. Also, Zuko doubted he really had it in him to murder someone in cold blood. His and Zhao's Agni Kai at the Hailu village was proof of that: Zuko had had his chance to get rid of Zhao there and then, but hadn't taken it.

Also, even if Zuko had it in him to kill Zhao and managed to somehow sneak up on him, there was still no way the next guy in the chain of command would call the whole thing off.

All in all, option one had very little to recommend it.

Option two: Capture the Avatar.

Zuko shook his head, although the irony wasn't lost on him. The Fire Nation was coming here right now because they wanted to capture the Avatar, but for the Navy to have been able to put together a fleet this size this quickly, there must have been plans in the making even before Aang knew he was coming here. Also, the armada wasn't here for just one kid.

Even if I captured the Avatar, Zhao would not stop there. Option three...?

Zuko was out of ideas. The previous two were really bad, but they would at least have some effect on the battle. There were a very limited number of things one man could do that would have any effect on the general outcome of a seemingly inevitable battle between sworn enemies.

What did Zuko even want the outcome of the battle to be?

Zuko wasn't a traitor, but even he could see that the Fire Nation pulling back (aka loosing) was the only option that could end in anything but utter bloodshed.

Option three: Talk Zhao down from his mad idea, and convince him to call the whole thing off.

Would Zhao actually care about the spirits, the balance of the world and all that? Even if the Admiral could get past the fact that he hated Zuko and would take advice from him seriously, would Zuko even be telling Zhao anything the Admiral didn't already know? Or cared about?

In all honesty, even Zuko was more concerned about the human lives that would be lost in the upcoming battle than those of the spirits. Uncle may disagree, but to Zuko, human affairs were more immediate and manageable. Let the Avatar worry about the Spirits.

Option four: Go to the Avatar with everything I know.

Zuko thought about it for all of three seconds before dismissing the idea. There was no way the gang wouldn't attack him on sight, and they would never listen to him or believe him. Also, if the Avatar had some awesome plan, Zuko would know about it by now. The kid wasn't exactly sneaky.

The Avatar should perhaps be warned about the threat to the Spirit World just out principle, but other than that, Zuko doubted Aang knew how to handle the situation any better than he did.

No matter what Zuko thought off, it all boiled down to either Aang or Zhao. Mostly to Zhao. The Admiral seemed to be the only one in a position to save the situation, but unfortunately Zhao was set on his course of action, and was highly unlikely to have a change of heart...

Zuko stopped, and felt like slapping himself, either for not considering this plan before, or because he was considering it now.

It would be madness to get rid of one delusional warmonger just to replace him with the most untrustworthy spirit of all time. Not that it would probably even work. Zhao was an important man, he was surely guarded all times, so any attempt at a change would be noticed immediately. In fact, if any suspicion about Zhao's true identity was raised, his underlings would be more than a little dubious about their leader's sudden hundred and eighty.

Zuko couldn't trust Nakki, and even if he could have, he had no idea how to get Nakki in a position to... dispose of the real admiral quietly. Except... Uncle.

Iroh was right by Zhao's side, almost as if they had planned to do this all along. If anyone could help Nakki pull off a scheme like this, it would be Uncle. Nakki couldn't probably take Zhao on in a fight, but Iroh could. Then Uncle could imprison and hide the Admiral while Nakki took his place.

Uncle could also offer a second opinion to back up Zhao's 'new tactic'. The others might still not buy it, but it would certainly create disarray. Also, mutiny onboard a ship was one of the greatest crimes. Even if Zhao's underlings were absolutely convinced that the Admiral was either a traitor or had lost his mind, or worse, had unexpectedly chosen the wretched path of pacifism, they would think twice before openly opposing him. They still might, but Zuko would just have to cross that bridge if he ever got even close to it.

There was still the matter of trusting Nakki to play his part, but at least Uncle could keep an eye on the spirit. Also, even if Nakki would not play ball, how much damage could the river spirit really cause during his short reign as the Admiral of Fire Navy? Probably not more than Zhao could...

And what if Nakki decided he liked his new job and wouldn't let it up peacefully? Well, Uncle could always out him, and even if Nakki told people of Iroh's own involvement, it would be a classic 'he said, she

said' -situation, where Iroh would have a better standing because he actually was who he claimed to be, was human and the first to speak up.

Nakki could not bend, nor did he have the memories of the people he impersonated. The impostor would be found out pretty quickly, no matter what else transpired. In the best case scenario that would be on the way home, at which point Nakki was unlikely to want to stick around to shoulder the blame anyway. On the other hand, if the spirit was found out earlier, there would not be a chance for him to stick around. Either way the risk of putting an evil spirit in Zhao's shoes indefinitely was next to non-existent.

If this worked, there would indeed be blame to go around with it. Zhao would be completely ruined. Even if the Admiral could prove that he had been deceived, and that he had not given the ridiculous orders, Zhao would still be at fault for letting himself be outwitted by an old man and a spirit, in the process causing the Fire Nation a great defeat. Indeed, Zhao may not thank them for sparing his life, even if they were able to do that, if the alternative was to live with the shame of letting an old man, a boy and a small-time spirit outplay him.

Uncle would be in a lot of trouble as well. Even if he claimed ignorance of the changeling, Zhao could set the record straight. Unless we kill the real admiral, of course.

Iroh would be accused of treason, which was the most unfair thing of all time. Uncle was not a traitor.

Though if Iroh was given a choice, he would help Zuko even when it meant going against his nation. _Hell, he would do it in any case if it were the right thing to do, and right now it is. Politics and nationalities aside, Zhao may intend to threaten, maybe even kill, the Moon and the Ocean. Stopping him is the Right Thing to Do._

So maybe Uncle _is_ a traitor. I am too, for even considering things. It just isn't that black and white anymore. Maybe it never was.

There was about a hundred things that could go wrong with this plan. Even if the plan was a complete success, all parties involved would probably end up paying a hefty price for their treason (except of course Nakki, who was unallied and thus inherently incapable of treason). And even so.

This is a very bad plan... but it is the best bad plan I have.

Besides, at such early stages, it didn't really matter whether the plan would or could even work or not. At this point Zuko just had to find a way to send word to Uncle about his idea, and ask for his advice, since Zuko would not go through with this thing if Iroh thought it doomed to fail. He would most likely not go through with this plan, that is.

In the meanwhile, Zuko could try to learn more about his mysterious 'benefactor'. If Nakki was to play an integral part in his plan, Zuko would need some kind of reassurances that he could be trusted. Or he would at least need any reason at all to think there was any chance

in hell that Nakki might come through for them.

Still, looks like I am moving ahead with option five: Operation Changeling.

Zuko couldn't help but feel that his life had been more simple when all he had to worry about was getting home by capturing an incredibly powerful, possibly non-existent master of four bendings.

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****A/N****

Thank you for all the encouraging reviews. I am well, thank you for asking, I have just been very busy with work and school. There is a lot of dialogue in this chapter, and we recap a bunch of stuff from the show, but also learn more of what my take on the spirit world is like. Not all of this stuff is canon.

I would like to leave a note here for Su No Yo, since you left an interesting and long review, but I can't PM you: Your speculations and suggestions were entertaining to read. I don't want to spoil the plot, but I can say that you are on the right track as far as your guesses for future plot developments go. Let's just say that I wholeheartedly agree with your sentiment that Zuko could have more friends on his life.

33. An Inside Job

****33. An Inside Job****

"_H__ow do you feel about the position of an admiral?"_ Zuko finished his explanation and glanced to the side to see if anyone had heard them, despite knowing that it wasn't actually possible for anyone to eavesdrop on his words when they were communicated through a mind link.

It had taken Zuko most of the morning to track down Nakki. He had finally found the river spirit touring the street vendors, once again in the guise of Taro. The Prince had dragged Nakki only a little distance from the main square, and now it was close to midday, so the area was buzzing with people. Zuko had wanted to relocate somewhere less exposed, but Nakki had pointed out that skulking around was far more suspicious than hiding in plain sight, and the Prince had to agree to the spirit's logic. A dragon could not easily go unnoticed wherever he went in the icy city.

Nakki looked thoughtful as he leaned against an ice fence. Zuko did not urge him. The Prince was aware that he had not necessarily done the greatest job of articulating his plan to his would-be accomplice, mostly due to the fact that Zuko was in his dragon form again. The Prince had never had difficulties talking to Tuli with the Power of Dragons, but it turned out that not all spirits were immune to the problems that came with forming a mind link.

Zuko found that although he could communicate to Nakki in this from, he was unable to see into the water spirit's thoughts and memories, so he didn't get any feedback on whether he had been understood or

not. Zuko did not know how different spirits truly were from humans, but he feared that they were different enough that thoughts could be lost in translation.

"There is no part of this plan that I object to, _but_", Nakki spoke up in a quiet voice, so that only Zuko could hear him, "I hope you realize that I will most likely not be able to take Admiral Zhao on in a fight."

Zuko nodded and communicated: _"Don't worry about it. Uncle will take care of that part."_

"Also, 'taking care of things' must not involve an epic firebending duel across the flagship's deck. I know you firebenders like your honor and straightforward strategies, but being _able to_ defeat the Admiral is meaningless if it cannot be done without raising alarm."

Zuko nodded again.

Nakki continued: "We also cannot, at any point, have two Zhaos running around, or no one will follow orders from either without hesitation. If it comes down to proving who is who, I will lose. The fake Admiral will only stand superficial scrutiny, since, likeness and my considerable acting talents aside, there is only so much I can bluff without Zhao's knowledge, memories or bending."

Zuko understood how awkward the transition would be if Iroh's part in the treason was found out, or Zhao's change of heart was too unbelievable. _"I am aware of the risks, and have no intention of being stupid about this."_

Nakki's face brightened: "Then you can count me in. When do we start?"

A small wave of relief washed over Zuko. There were still many details that needed to be hammered out and a myriad of things that could go wrong, but Nakki agreeing effortlessly was a start. Now Zuko had an accomplice, which meant he didn't have to solve all his problems by himself.

"_Before we can do anything to Zhao, I need to explain this plan to Uncle, since his participation is crucial. However, I am not sure how to reach him before the fleet gets here. I could fly south and hope I run into the fleet, but that would not be subtle, and stopping to communicate could raise suspicions."_

"I doubt reaching General Iroh before the fleet arrives at the Northern Water Tribe would give us much of a head start, anyway. To us, the sooner the fleet changes its direction the better, but we also need to give the Admiral a _plausible _reason for his sudden change of heart. There is a risk in waiting, but personally, I find it more believable that Zhao would call off the invasion at the sight of the Water Tribe's great walls, or after some initial battles have not gone as smoothly as was hoped, rather than somewhere halfway between here and the Earth Kingdom."

Zuko nodded. Nakki was right.

"Now, may I inquire how you had planned to contact your uncle once

the fleet does get here?" Nakki asked.

"_I'm... I am still working on that part. I think I will go as a human, paddle over in a canoe, and sneak onboard Zhao's flagship in the dead of night. That is where Uncle will be."_

"Hmm. That sounds risky and time-consuming."

"_Do you have a better idea?"_

"I could sneak onboard incognito any time of day, maybe even right away, and walk around without fear of recognition. I need to infiltrate Zhao's ship at some point _anyway_, and that way I would be right where I am needed, ready to act as soon as General Iroh has done his part. Unfortunately, though, something tells me I would have a hard time convincing your uncle of our unexpected alliance and my good intentions."

Zuko considered that. On one hand, he missed Uncle and wanted to talk to him. On the other hand, somebody needed to keep an eye on the Avatar and the Water Tribe, and Zuko already had their trust, albeit a reserved one. Zuko and Uncle could do more separately, which was why Zuko had come here alone to begin with. And when it came to trusting Nakki to do his part... that was a risk Zuko was going to have to take anyway.

"_I could write a note in my own hand, explaining the plan, and you could deliver it to Uncle."_

"True. Or I could forge a note in your hand, and deliver it to General Iroh, because I enjoy getting people into trouble. I fear your uncle is too wise to trust a piece of paper in a matter such as this. But... the idea of a letter is not without merit. I am certain that by the time the fleet gets here, we will have thought of a not-too-suspicious way of bringing your Uncle onboard and up to speed."

"In my experience, even the best prepared plans find their final shape in the execution stage. Perhaps, for the time being, there is nothing to do but wait", Nakki said thoughtfully. "We will not have to wait long."

Nakki did not clarify why he had reason to think the Fire Navy would get here soon, but Zuko did not feel like going through another round of verbal sparring just to find out if Nakki was simply guessing or if the spirit had more information on the matter than Zuko did. Instead Zuko accepted the spirit's reasoning as most likely correct.

"_Even without Uncle's participation, we can start to prepare for Operation Changeling. Starting with: how well do you know Zhao?"_

"Zhao and I have met, albeit briefly, but I think I have a pretty good idea of what he is like. Also, while I am hiding among Zhao's crew as a nameless firebender, waiting for a signal from your uncle, I will probably have a chance to observe the Admiral up close. I will at least see what Zhao is like around his underlings, and that is likely to be the only side his crew really knows of him."

Zuko thought for a moment. _"Describe him to me."_

"Zhao? Well, on the surface he is your stereotypical firebender... on steroids, I guess. He is decisive, ambitious, imposing and temperamental. He does not take well to disobedience or even hesitation, and although he can be smooth and polite to those who matter, I imagine he takes no butts from those serving under him. This will work to our advantage, of course."

Zuko wasn't particularly pleased to hear what your 'stereotypical firebender' was like in the other nations' eyes, but Nakki was probably right.

"This is how anyone would describe Admiral Zhao after a brief acquaintance, somewhat depending on the context of that meeting. This is the side of him that is visible on the surface. To guess what is underneath, we have to use deduction. Zhao is a formidable bender, but he has not gotten into the position he is in now with his bending talents alone. This means he is either good at what he does, very good at finding political allies, or most likely a bit of both.

"When I was onboard Zhao's ship, his men did not sound mutinous, nor did they complain very loudly about their workload. This means that Zhao is, if not liked, at least competent. When it comes to military leaders, ability to perform one's duties is always more important to soldiers than niceness is. The Admiral is competent in sailing and organizing troops, I think. At least more so than in planning war campaigns, considering that he is set to attack the Northern Water Tribe on their home soil around the full moon.

"The Admiral hired me to blow up your ship without visible moral scruples about the decision, so ruthless he certainly is, though that is, again, a trait shared by almost all high-ranking Fire Navy officers. Achieving his goals and bringing honor to himself and his lineage seem to be Zhao's driving motivations, and there is little he would not do to get what he wants. Like you, Zhao is not the sort of guy to throw in the towel after few hardships, which will make it harder for us to pull off our little stunt.

"Single-minded ambition makes Zhao dangerous, but also predictable. However, I suspect that so long as he stops to think every now and then, the Admiral is not without a brain, nor without a heart. Even the plan to use spirits as bargaining tools may sound unreasonable, but it is not unreasoned. He is taking an enormous risk, but it shows Zhao can take initiative, and has the courage to go through with ambitious plans.

"At a guess, I would say he comes either from an impoverished noble family, and is the only one of his lineage to have made a name for himself, or he comes from trade background, and wanted a career in politics, but lacked the wealth, title and connections to move ahead. Both possible backgrounds would explain why Zhao hates you so much; he must feel that you were given everything that he has ever wanted on a silver platter at birth, but you threw it all away. All in all, I believe the navy generally attracts young men with a burning desire to prove themselves and be remembered by historians. Am I wrong?"

Zuko was a bit astonished by the description, and the word

'observant' just made it to his list of words he would use to describe Nakki. Zuko could have probably given a similar description of the Admiral, but the Prince had known Zhao for years, and had even been inside his mind. Even so, Zuko's version could have been more or less summarized into 'vicious warmonger'.

Zuko's surprise must have shown on his face, for the spirit gave Zuko a mildly irritated raise of an eyebrow: "I do know how to fool people. It is sort of what I do."

"_You did not fool me when trying to portray Iroh."_

Nakki grinned widely. "True. Then let us hope that the Admiral does not have a close family member working onboard his ship."

Zuko... did not actually know if Zhao had family. Most likely Zhao was too dedicated to his career to have time for marriage and children, but his parents probably still lived, and he might have siblings or cousins. Especially in times of war, when every able body gets enlisted, you could never be sure, who had a family waiting for them at home.

_Oh, hell. Killing Zhao just got harder. _The fact that Zuko would not be the one to personally do the killing did not make the Admiral's death any less his decision and responsibility.

ooo

"There you are!" Sokka exclaimed, relieved that he had located Kulo before he had to actually admit to Yue that he had no idea where the dragon was.

Sokka had gotten up early to get prepared for today's outing. His fur jacket was clean and his wolftail... well, it was actually much the same as it always was, but he had made an effort look more presentable, and that was what counted.

To Sokka's surprise, Kulo had gotten up even earlier, and was already out by the time the boy had stopped by the dragon's den. Sokka had realized then that he had only told Kulo the time but not the place of their meeting, but he had also hoped that the dragon would show up near their sleeping quarters.

After that Sokka's greater concern had been that Princess Yue might have changed her mind and wouldn't come. Thankfully, the white-haired young woman had arrived exactly on time and had appeared excited, although a bit melancholic. To be honest, Sokka had never seen the Princess without a weak but unmistakable aura of sadness around her. Perhaps it was simply a part of the way she was, since being a princess had to be an enormous responsibility, or it could as well be a temporary thing caused by the solemn circumstance.

Now, as Sokka draw closer to the dragon's location, he could only be grateful that Kulo had chosen a relatively exposed place for his activities. Before Yue had arrived, Sokka had already been to Kulo's den, Gaang's sleeping quarters, the waterbending practicing ground, the warrior training yard and all the dragon's other usual hideouts. Checking out the market place had been a lucky guess, but thankfully a right one, and at least it kept Sokka from having to admit to the

Chief's daughter that the Avatar's lot wasn't keeping a keen eye on the dragon although they had promised they would. Not to mention that it would have been plain old embarrassing.

Sokka turned to Yue and smiled: "I thought Kulo might be here. He is so very, em, sociable."

Yue smiled back in the ever-composed way she acted around her subjects. "I had feared that the Avatar's dragon would not like it here in the northern climate, but he does look surprisingly comfortable. And I am glad he has made friends here."

"Oh, sure. He is..." Sokka started to say, glanced at the dragon, and then glanced again. And sure enough, Kulo wasn't alone. Which was odd, since although Kulo had not been hostile toward the people of the Water Tribe (well, most of the time), the dragon hadn't exactly made an effort to communicate with anyone but Sokka, Katara and Aang.

"Hi, Taro", Sokka greeted and, unable resist his curiosity, asked: "What brings you here?"

Kulo looked annoyed and even a bit guilty, like Sokka had walked in on him doing something he wasn't allowed to, but Taro was back to his nonchalant arrogance. "Oh, me? I happened to run into your dragon here and thought I would apologize one more time for yesterday's misunderstanding."

Taro said the last word in such a conspicuous way that Yue caught on that something unexpected was going on. "What misunderstanding?"

Before Sokka had time to say anything, Taro took one look at the girl, his eyes widened and he stuttered: "Pri... Princess Yue."

Taro was attempting something akin to a bow, when Yue gestured that there was no need for such formalities. It was amusing to watch Taro stutter and give Sokka a new look of respect, but there was also something... off about the situation. Sokka had not seen many others react in such a way to Yue's presence, though maybe he had only seen Yue interact with other high nobles. Or maybe Taro was just particularly interested in social hierarchy, which wouldn't actually surprise Sokka in the least.

Yue and Taro exchanged a few courtesies, mostly about where he was from, but Sokka tuned them out and turned to Kulo, who was perched in a precarious looking position on an ice wall.

"Don't tell me you forgot about our trip today?" Sokka said, and smiled to let Kulo know he wasn't all that angry.

Kulo had the decency to finally look a bit ashamed. He glided down to street level.

"Well", Taro continued, "I don't mean to hold you back, so I better get going."

The boy bowed a quick goodbye to everyone present, but also turned one more time towards Kulo. "And about the thing we were just talking about: leave the details to me."

Before Sokka had time to ask what the hell Taro was going on about, the boy left, and Sokka noticed that Taro could move surprisingly quickly without actually running. Sokka turned his questioning look to Kulo instead. The dragon closed his eyes as if mildly annoyed and shook his head.

In a different situation Sokka may have kept at it, but now they were already almost half an hour late from their planned schedule, and although Sokka had no hurry to be anywhere else, Yue might have other duties to attend to later, so Sokka wanted to get going already.

"Right. So, this is Kulo. Kulo, this is Princess Yue. Okay, who's ready for some flying?"

Princess Yue looked a bit nervous at that, though nowhere near as nervous as Kulo. Sokka gave the dragon an encouraging tap on the shoulder before climbing onboard. Or more accurately before he realized he had never actually flown on Kulo as a passenger, and tried to look casual while Kulo helped him up.

Sokka got on top of the dragon with his dignity intact, and could only presume that Kulo had had passengers before. That was comforting. Maybe they should have just taken Appa after all, but it was too late to change his mind now.

Sokka helped Yue up so that she sat in front of him. Since she seemed even more worried now, he added: "You are probably pretty nervous; I was on my first flight, but don't worry. You just hold onto the mane for support and I will hold onto the both of you. I will not let you fall, I promise you that."

Once they were ready to go, Sokka looked at Kulo, who had his head turned halfway to his passengers. "You will take it pretty easy, right? It being her first time and all."

_Not to mention _my_ first time,_ Sokka thought and realized that the newness of their friendship might be the reason why Kulo had hesitated to agree to this. Sokka was putting a lot of trust in Kulo here, more than he had ever put in the dragon before, but it must have also taken a great deal for the semi-wild dragon to agree to be ridden like a common beast of burden.

And yet, Sokka didn't think he was outrageously out of line to have asked for this favor. There wasn't a clear list of things you could not ask a dragon to do for you, just like there was no clear list of things that you couldn't ask a friend to do for you, but it depended on the situation and the friendship. And how you asked.

Treat dragons with respect. Sokka was slowly starting to feel like he understood what Ari had meant by that.

Kulo nodded. Sokka had a feeling that after today he would trust the dragon unreservedly for the first time. So long as they survived this flight.

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If Zuko had ever felt the need to kidnap a princess, this would have

been an unmissable opportunity. _I don't know if the Earth King has daughters, but I will never get anywhere close to that royal family, and I would have much better chances of kidnapping Yue than Azula any day._

In reality, Zuko did not want to do anything that would make the situation _more_ messy than it already was, of course.

A dutiful princess, an arranged marriage, a rugged young warrior and a forbidden love. If Zuko didn't know better, he would have thought he had landed in a cheesy love story. Add an Avatar, a dragon and a disguised prince from an enemy nation, and the plot had more soap opera to it than Love among Dragons.

Whether the story would turn out to be a comedy or a tragedy still remained to be seen.

Zuko was flying as slowly as he knew how, which meant that although they had been cruising above the Northern Water Tribe for almost half an hour, they hadn't covered all that much ground. His passengers weren't complaining though, and Zuko figured that at least Sokka must have appreciated the leisurely pace. Although the Avatar's lot flew everywhere every day, they were usually in a hurry to or from something, so it couldn't actually be called cruising but rather running for their lives.

Also, Zuko had a funny feeling that, although the view was stunning, the two lovebirds were more interested in having a private conversation than looking at the breathtaking vista. A few times he even wondered if they even remembered he was still there.

Not that Zuko was complaining. The situation could have been much more awkward if the flirting between the two youngsters hadn't been so innocent and unsure.

Still, although learning secrets had been one of Zuko's goals, now he just felt like he was eavesdropping on things that were none of his business. On the other hand, at least Sokka knew that Zuko was just as smart as he was, so even if the young warrior had forgotten that for a moment, it did not mean Zuko was being dishonest. Surely they wouldn't say anything they couldn't say in front of any acquaintance?

Sokka talked of his life in the south, and of how he wasn't even sure if his father was still alive or if he had fallen fighting the Fire Nation. They had apparently run into a fellow tribe member during their tour through the Earth Kingdom, and had gotten their first word in years of his and Katara's father's whereabouts and well-being, but situations could change rapidly.

Princess Yue avoided more intimate topics and spoke more generally of the ways of her people and what life was like in the north. Still, the fact that they spent most of the trip discussing women's rights and arranged marriages spoke quite a good deal of what parts of the Northern Water Tribe's culture irked her off. Still, whenever Sokka suggested she should rebel, Yue just shook her head and steered the conversation to a different topic.

Zuko could understand why. Even if she was unhappy with the arrangement, if it was in the best interest of her people, it could

not be avoided. The Prince could both understand and sympathize her situation. Every marriage in Zuko's family had been an arranged one, and if he hadn't been banished at the age of thirteen, Zuko would likely already be promised to someone himself.

Zuko was the first to notice the change in atmosphere, though that was no surprise considering his heightened senses. The wind was blowing from the south, and small flakes of snow drifted down from the sky. Except these flakes weren't made of just water.

Super senses aside, Zuko would have recognized this sort of 'snow' anywhere. He had lived on a Fire Nation ship for years, after all, and knew everything about the effect a combustion engine could have on falling snow. Except that no single ship, no matter how big, could have had an effect on this scale. Within moments, the trio were surrounded by twirls of black snow.

So, the fleet is close.

"The Fire Nation", Sokka said solemnly, having apparently reached the same conclusion.

"We should go back", Yue summarized what must have been on all of their minds.

The moment they landed back in the city, Sokka and Yue began to run for the palace, leaving Zuko alone to figure out what to do with himself now that his schedule had turned out tighter than he had thought. Not that Zuko could really complain about not having enough time to finish his plan, taking into consideration that if the fleet had arrived this time yesterday, there would have been no plan for Zuko to finish up.

In the end, Zuko decided to follow Sokka. He still needed to find a way to contact his uncle, but Nakki was presumably already working on that, and Zuko really wanted to hear what was being said inside the palace walls.

Although Zuko had been near the palace a number of times, he hadn't had a need to go inside before. He chose to go in through the front door. It was big enough to accommodate him without making him feel trapped, and Zuko was fairly sure it wasn't just a ceremonial passage only to be used by royalty, since there was a good number of common people running through it right now.

They are gathering the warriors and elders, Zuko noted. _This must be a briefing on the upcoming battle._

If Zuko's plan worked, there would hopefully be no need for a battle plan, but he would still like to hear it, all the same. It seemed unlikely that the battle could be avoided entirely, and even if the fleet turned around, there was no guarantee the Water Tribe wouldn't pursue. Zuko thought it unlikely, for surely the Northerners realized how outnumbered they were, but he couldn't count on it. There was no love for the Fire Nation among the citizens of the Northern Water Tribe, warriors and leaders alike. Maybe they were vengeful and unconcerned enough to do something drastic. And who knew, maybe they would even win. If the situations were reversed, the Fire Lord would not let a direct attack on Azulon go unavenged.

People all around Zuko were giving him weary and at times even frightened looks. He made it inside and to a doorway to a larger gathering area when two palace guards finally blocked his way. Or at least they stepped in front of him, though Zuko could have gone past them with ease.

This is it, then. I came here to gain their trust and now that trust will be put to a test.

The soldiers were sweating but stood their ground. Zuko cocked his head to the side and squinted his eyes as if trying to figure something out; non-verbally questioning the men's logic. Surely the Water Tribe would benefit from having _all_ their allies in on their war plans, so as to avoid unfortunate collisions.

Truth be told, Zuko had been a little surprised to be allowed free access this far into the palace, since most of the locals probably still saw him either as an animal or an enemy, and neither had any place in a war meeting.

The guards were hesitating. From what Zuko had heard, Appa had been allowed inside for the Avatar's welcoming party, though perhaps a war meeting had more strict rules. Still, playing a dumb animal would probably work better than winning over their trust.

The guards weren't benders, of that Zuko was fairly sure. They were armed with spears, and waterbenders didn't usually carry conventional weapons. The uniforms of the waterbender's were often a tad finer and lighter, too. Also, for some reason, the Water Tribes tended to separate benders and non-benders into different units, so a mix-match seemed highly unlikely.

It made sense to put waterbenders together so that they could perform more powerful moves in unison, but personally, Zuko would have had more mixed teams to keep the enemy on their toes. Perhaps this was another tradition that had served the Tribe well eighty years ago, but was now horribly out of date. While Fire Nation's war tactics had advanced and been honed over the course of the war, the Tribe's had not.

Benders or not, Zuko could take the guards down easily enough if he wanted to, but that would not help him to be accepted into the meeting.

Maybe they shouldn't even let him in, because at the end of the day, Zuko wasn't on their side. Still, it wasn't like Zuko was here to report secret war plans to the enemy, but rather to feel the atmosphere and to assess what the Tribe was and wasn't willing to do to win this battle.

Zuko looked past the guards to see if anyone more high-ranking would come to solve the situation. He was hoping for the Avatar or one of his friends, but got Master Pakku instead.

Pakku did not ask what was the problem or what was going on. He walked in, greeted the guards and Zuko with a small nod, and then turned to address Zuko.

"Master Kulo, I am afraid that this meeting is for the warriors of the Water Tribe only."

Zuko used one of his whiskers to point at Aang, clearly visible in the distance in his orange outfit.

Pakku corrected his statement: "For Water Tribe warriors, high-ranking officials and special guests. Though I am sure that if any detail discussed in this meeting will greatly concern you, the Avatar will tell you all about it."

And then Pakku just about sighed, quite possibly realizing that the Avatar and his friends would indeed tell Zuko everything. Even so, the master wasn't backing down, and Zuko wasn't sure he could take on Master Pakku. Not that the Prince had come here to start a fight. On the contrary.

Zuko still felt annoyed. He hated being excluded from important decision-making, and now he wouldn't have even a theoretical chance to have an input on the plan. Still, this had been a long-shot at best, the war plan had probably been decided days ago, and they wouldn't listen to him anyway.

Zuko nodded stiffly and departed before Pakku would have a chance to question him further on his comings and goings.

On his way out, most people steered clear off him, so Zuko was a little surprised to run into someone. It was Taro.

"Hi there. I have an idea, but I need to attend this meeting first."

The spirit didn't wink at him, but other than that Nakki wasn't being particularly subtle. Zuko nodded, oddly feeling even more left out than before, despite knowing that between Nakki and Aang, Zuko would probably learn everything that had been decided.

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Nakki, still in human disguise, ran down a street to where Zuko was pacing around and constantly glancing at the horizon.

"We are writing your uncle a letter. I would have done it already, but since details count, perhaps something actually written by you will have the sort of words you and only you would use, and thus be more believable."

"_I thought you said Uncle would never trust a letter. Also, what happened in the meeting?"_

"General Iroh will not accept a letter coming from _me_. That is why you are taking it to him, and since we do not have time to waste, you will take it to him as a dragon, as soon as the fleet arrives. The general havoc ought to give you a cover."

Zuko blinked. "You want me to... fly over there as a dragon and hand my uncle a scroll. Isn't that a bit obvious?"

Nakki rolled his eyes, but smiled. "You may not be quite as good an actor as I am, but surely you can think of a more innocuous way to pass on a message? And no, it won't be subtle, but does it have to be? If you make a big enough show of your _presence_, no one will

actually notice a scroll exchanging hands. I am not sure you fully understand the kind of effect meeting a dragon up close has on a man.

"So, I suggest you fly around, looming and ominous. Then, as soon as you locate your uncle, you land close enough to him to give him the scroll. Then you fly a few more circles and, if you think you can pull it off, land on a few more ships before heading back. With any luck, you may even discourage some of the sailors in the process, since they are known to be a superstitious bunch, and seeing a black dragon is a bad omen."

"_I am not afraid of landing on Fire Navy ships, but... I don't want the sailors to think that I am on the Water Tribe's side. Because I am not. I don't want to have to fight either side, but if all else fails and I have to fight... And there might come a time when people learn that the black dragon and Prince Zuko are the one and the same, and how could they accept a flat out traitor as their future Fire Lord?"_

Zuko could only imagine the looks of relief on the faces of his old crew, when they would see the black dragon and realize that the rumors of Prince Zuko's demise were greatly exaggerated. And the looks of hurt and disbelief when they would realize that Zuko would not be helping them to fight the Water Tribe, and was in fact welcome in the enemy's midst.

_If the plan fails and the battle cannot be avoided, what will I do? I cannot betray my people, but can I attack the Water Tribe, and possibly cause the death of not just a civilisation, but of the Ocean and the Moon as well? Which side will I pick, or should I just sit back and do nothing while people die all around me? _

No. That is not an option.

Nakki's voice was toneless when he answered: "Hmm. Perhaps you should look at the problem from a different angle. Think of which is more important to you: the survival of mankind or your future career?"

Zuko felt his temper flare, but he kept his expression even. Mostly, because Nakki was right. Although Prince Zuko wanted nothing more than to be a loyal friend to his crew and to become a good leader to his people, Dragon Warrior Zuko knew that the Water Tribe, the Moon and the Ocean were not the sort of things one could gamble with in the name of anything.

"Because I know what my priorities are, but do you know yours? And if you are having second thoughts, let me know at once, and we will go our separate ways from here", Nakki continued.

"_I will do whatever it takes to prevent Zhao's plan, and if this way we can save the most lives, then I am in."_

Nakki smiled easily. "I thought so. If it makes you feel any better, your dragon alter ego has already been declared a traitor after you helped the Avatar escape Pohuai Stronghold. Also, under the current regime and laws, I don't see a dragon warrior sitting on the Dragon Throne, period."

Zuko felt even more discouraged, but now wasn't a time to dwell on it. Instead he looked up and asked: _"And the meeting?"_

Nakki looked puzzled: "The meeting...? Oh yes, the meeting! Nothing important, to be honest."

Zuko glared. _"Elaborate."_

"Oh, you know what these debriefings are like. Lots of national pride and 'we will fight to the last man' mentality. They are evacuating the civilians to the inner city, while the warriors will defend the walls and the lower levels. If the Fire Nation breaches the city, it will be an open fight for every city block. The Tribe asks help from the spirits, but the way they are going about it, they won't get any special treatment. Trust me."

Zuko frowned. _"Should we do the same? I mean, in a way that will make the spirits respond."_

Zuko wasn't a particularly spiritual person, but he did not doubt the spirits' existence or might. _"I have drawn special attention from the spirits in the past, so they might be willing to listen, and you will know what to say. I know you said that I shouldn't trust most spirits, but at least Tuli might want to help. She said she would not be able to manifest here, but perhaps you could find a loophole."_

"You put too much credit in me. I am more limited than you perhaps realize, and just like I cannot wander deserts, a small-time fire spirit cannot come this far north. Also, I am not sure she would give you the kind of help you are looking for, since you have a different set of priorities.

"Do you think that your Tuli cares about humans? I mean, _all humans. She has certainly taken a liking to you, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can trust her. There is a reason why I am the one to tell you so much, while she has only provided you with vague non-answers, and the reason is that she wants to protect you. She isn't against humankind, but she hasn't been entirely honest with you, because she cares more about your well-being than the well-being of thousands.

"Don't get me wrong: Tuli is a good ally to have. So long as you know what her priorities are and acknowledge that when she gives you tips, she doesn't have the best interest of mankind or Fire Nation at heart."

Zuko would take Tuli's word over Nakki's any day, but perhaps the river spirit was right in the sense that Zuko should have less blind faith in the goodness of spirits.

"_Did anything else happen in the meeting?"_

"Hmm. Looks like I will have some competition."

Zuko raised an eyebrow. Nakki smiled. "Apparently, you are not the only one to think of assassinating the Admiral. The Water Tribe are sending a secret squad of warriors to infiltrate the fleet, but I am not worried about that. Those amateurs won't get on my way, since they will not get anywhere near the Admiral. Even if they do, Zhao

can handle them. Hell, _I _can take them on if need be. In a non-lethal way, of course, if that is what you prefer."

"_So... you think their idea is overreaching, but ours is not."_

"Their attempt is a desperate, last ditch effort, while ours is a sophisticated inside job. The difference in results tends to be tangible."

"_What about the Avatar? What are they asking him to do?"_

"Nothing. I mean, of course they hope that Aang will help them, and that his presence will give them an edge over the Fire Nation, but they haven't given him a specific assignment. I think they hope that the Avatar knows what to do, and will do his 'Avatar thing'."

"_And will he? In your opinion, will Aang be a problem?"_

"Aang has no moral scruples over choosing sides, that's for sure. Nor has he any intentions of staying out of the fight, so, off the top of my head, my answer would be that Aang will most certainly try to get on our way. He is a child and a pacifist, but that won't stop him from fighting. It didn't stop the Air Nomads. Survival and revenge are great motivators. So yes, Aang will be trouble, one way or another, but no more than every other group of soldiers fighting in this battle. Unless the Avatar makes an appearance, that is. Then things could get messy."

Zuko remembered the first time he had fought Aang on his ship, and how the boy had changed when the Avatar spirit took him over. The Avatar had swept the floor with Zuko in a single move. Literally.

Zuko nodded. He could appreciate the difference.

The river spirit turned to look at him. "Shall we go then? You will need to resume your human shape to write a message."

"_Nakki, do you think our plan will work?"_

Nakki looked thoughtful. "It isn't a bad plan, but the situation is precarious and there are many nuisance variables. It might work out perfectly, it might work out partially or it might fail miserably. Even if it does not work, the situation can hardly get worse, so I'd say it is a goal worth attempting to achieve. Why do you ask? Do you have a plan B you would like to let me in on?"

Zuko shook his head to show that he was all out of ideas. But he also had another question. "_And if it does work, and we manage to turn the navy around for now. What happens then?"_

"Then we hooray, for we will have saved the day. I am not going to lie and say that all our problems will disappear. In fact we will probably have made many new enemies, and we might all want a change of scenery sooner rather than later, but I think we can cross that bridge when and if we get there."

"_But... Even if we succeed in stopping the deaths of the Moon and the Ocean this time, what's there to stop Koh from trying something

else next? Something equally catastrophic. I know killing spirits is a bad idea, but to keep the mankind safe, shouldn't we go straight to the source of all this, and kill Koh?"_

Nakki looked puzzled. "Well... Think of it this way: the Face Stealer is like a mirror. If one shows emotion in his presence, he can feed on those emotions. However, Koh is only as malicious as the world he reflects."

Zuko thought that over. _"So, if we fix the world, Koh will stop trying to end humankind."_

Nakki shrugged. No promises. It was still a start.

"Now, if that is all, we should go to your igloo. I have already acquired a set of writing equipment and placed them there, and I suggest we move quickly."

Nakki began walking, but Zuko hesitated. He would have wanted to do something more substantial. Maybe he should go look for Aang's lot and see what they were up to. On the other hand, this plan was all Zuko had, and he shouldn't ignore it just because he didn't think his own role in it was important enough. Because if the plan failed, there would be more than plenty for him to do, and none of it pleasant.

34. Half-truths

34. Half-truths

Sergeant Jiri stood on the deck of the ship, looked out toward the horizon and waited. He was on guard duty, but considering how their vessel was surrounded on all sides by dozens of other Fire Nation ships, it was unlikely that the Water Tribe would be able to take them by surprise.

"Any sign of the enemy?" Lieutenant Jee asked and walked over to the Sergeant. Jiri turned to face him and shook his head. The Lieutenant nodded and came to stand next to him, gazing toward the horizon as well. Any moment now, they would become some of the first Fire Nation citizens in over eighty years to witness the majesty of the Northern Water Tribe capital.

Jiri was cold and scared, and although there was a feeling of destiny in the air, the excitement it could have caused under ordinary circumstances was drowned out by the gloomy mood on the ship. It was not just fear of the upcoming battle that was keeping spirits low, though that of course played a big part, but it had also been over two weeks since Prince Zuko had allegedly died, and although most of the crew still found it hard to believe, nothing had been heard from him since.

Up on the command deck, the Sergeant could see their new captain, a sullen man in his fifties, giving last minute orders. Since Zhao had only taken Zuko's crew but not the Prince's ship, the soldiers had been assigned to a new vessel. This ship was bigger and in much better shape than their old one, but if Jiri had a choice, he would have preferred being on Zuko's ship. And not just because they all missed the Prince's company and leadership, but over the years, the

crew had learned their little ship's weaknesses and quirks, and Jiri would have felt more sure going into battle in a ship he knew inside and out.

This vessel was bigger and newer than their old one, but with the invasion of the North looming over them, the Navy hadn't been able to spare enough new hands, and they were a tad undermanned. That had actually turned out to be an advantage rather than a problem, as their ship had been assigned to the third wave of the assault, which consisted mostly of inexperienced and undermanned vessels.

The first wave would attack the city from afar with specially designed catapults. Most of the first wave would probably be lost in the fight against the waterbenders before getting near the capital, so it was the second wave's job to bring the first landing parties to shore.

Most of the ships in the third wave weren't carrying their maximum capacity of troops, and in between battles, the third wave would gather sailors and soldiers from sunken or irreparable damaged ships from the first two waves. After evacuating the destroyed ships, they would follow the second wave and set land. That was why they had onboard the backup landing parties, some komodo-rhinos and even a few tanks.

The fourth and final wave would stay back and secure the water area, making sure the Water Tribe couldn't attack the fleet from behind and potentially trap their troops on land. The Fire Nation had the most versatile and resilient navy in the world, while the Water Tribe's greatest advantage was their heavily fortified position and knowledge of the land. However, the Tribe had years of experience fighting on water, so a counterattack from the sea wasn't out of the question, and the Fire Navy fleet could not afford to get caught between two fires, so to speak.

The good thing about being on the third wave of the assault was that it was nowhere near as dangerous as being on the first or second wave. Initially, before their orders had come in, some of the other crew members had been sure that Zhao would assign them into the first wave just to spite Prince Zuko, but it turned out that the Admiral wasn't quite that petty. Not that the Prince was in a place to take offense, if the rumors were true, though Jiri was inclined to think they weren't. Zuko's crew had seen the Prince face worse odds than a ship getting blown to bits. The Sergeant liked to think that sooner or later they would hear from their old captain.

General Iroh was also participating in the invasion, but since Iroh was serving on the flagship, none of the men on Zuko's old crew had been able to ask him about what had happened to the Prince. But, as Lieutenant Jee had put it, if Zuko was truly dead, Iroh would not be here but somewhere mourning his nephew. Unless of course Iroh was here to make sure that Zuko's old crew was okay, or if Zhao had had something to do with Zuko's untimely departure, and the Dragon of the West was out for revenge.

Their crew hadn't received many new members before setting off toward the Northern Water Tribe, but three landing parties, each consisting of eight marines, had accompanied them the whole way. The commander of the landing parties arrived on the deck to exchange a few words in private with Lieutenant Jee. Jiri could not make out what they were

saying.

Technically speaking, the commander of the marines should have gone to their captain with whatever he had to say to the sailors, but the men on the landing parties had long ago figured out that the crew respected and obeyed Jee more than their new captain. This meant that if you wanted something done fast on this ship, Lieutenant Jee was your man.

Keeping the Captain out of the loop was just a small sign of rebellion, but still something the crew could take pride in. They may have to follow Zhao's lead from now on, but they didn't have to acquiesce quietly. Direct mutiny was punishable by death, and it was also unwise to let inner power struggles weaken the structure of the command chain. When the battle started, they would do their best to serve their country well, but the crew had unanimously felt that they had to do _something_ to honor Prince Zuko's memory.

Once their ship would go ashore, Jiri and some of the other younger and fitter crew members would go with the landing parties and secure the foothold area. The ship would stay manned enough that it could depart at a moment's notice, but of course in practice, if an evacuation order was given, the ones assigned to stay on the ship wouldn't go anywhere without the rest of the men they had arrived with. The Fire Navy left no man behind.

Usually, the risk of sudden retreat was small, because the Fire Navy almost never backed away after gaining a foothold. However, Jiri had heard from some of the older sailors that once the sun set, they would have no choice but to retreat, and that they would have to do so every night. A constant back-and-forth motion would cause many unnecessary deaths, but there was no alternative. The Tribe could not be defeated during night.

Usually, the idea of a siege was to cut out your opponent's forces from their supply lines and starve them out before attacking. However, since this time it was the Fire Navy that had no supply lines to speak of, the longer the siege lasted, the worse their odds of winning would get. This meant that the Fire Navy would need to defeat the Tribe either very quickly or not at all. Jiri expected that their leaders would try to push through the outer defenses of the city quickly, use overwhelming force, and even take risks to bring about an early victory.

Well, at least we don't have to stay in this cold place very long, Jiri thought as a freezing gust of wind made him shiver.

"It has begun", Jee spoke up and pointed out to the sea. Jiri could not hear the battle yet, not over the hum of the engine, but he could see a new streak of smoke rising from somewhere just below the horizon. The fleet was constantly surrounded by a cloud of soot, but Jiri guessed that, as a firebender, Lieutenant Jee could probably tell the difference between smoke from a ship's chimney and smoke rising from an open fire better than he could.

The first wave must have begun launching their catapults at the capital. Jiri still couldn't see the city, but he could see the burning missiles rising into air, and he could deduct from their trajectories where the capital was.

The Sergeant had heard that the city was a fortress, and that the Tribe's warriors were fierce and their benders powerful, but as Jiri looked around him, he couldn't help but think that the Water Tribe couldn't possibly match the might of this invasion fleet. Or, at least he hoped they couldn't, because if most of the fleet would be crushed by the opposition, even the remaining, retrieving ships would be easy pickings so far from reinforcements. If they lost this battle, no one on this ship would ever see home again.

A few minutes passed mostly in silence as their ship sailed on. Eventually, Jiri could make out sounds of battle. It was eerie to head straight towards the fighting without really knowing what you were up against. Hopefully, the same applied the other way around; the bulk of the fleet could not be seen from the city yet.

Jiri wasn't a coward, but he wasn't used to entering a battle without the ability to stop to assess the situation or turn back if need be. For many years now, he had served on small assignments, and their work under Zuko had always been more or less independent of what the rest of the Navy was doing, but when you were a part of a fleet this size, no single soldier or ship could use their own judgement and act independently. To come out of this alive, everyone had to follow orders to the hilt, trusting their leaders to know the bigger picture.

Those of the crew who weren't needed to steer the ship right now or keep the engine going had gathered on the deck to be on the ready in case the fight suddenly spread here. Everyone was geared up and in full armor.

"Look", Seaman Oki had walked up to them. "It's the Avatar."

Sure enough, Jiri could see the Avatar's bison flying in the horizon. So the rumors were true. They would be facing the Avatar as well as the Northern Water Tribe.

"Should we be ready to land?" Oki asked from the commander of the landing troops.

The bearded man nodded hesitantly. "I very much doubt we will get that far before nightfall, but we have to be ready for the possibility."

"Look!" Jee shouted, this time excitedly. "It's Prin... It's that dragon!"

Now all eyes searched the sky and, sure enough, an unmistakable, long, dark shape was soaring above the fleet. Jiri was relieved, but he didn't dare rejoice too obviously. Which was more than could be said for most of Zuko's old crew, if the general wave of whoopees and relieved swearing under people's breaths was anything to go by. The people on the landing parties and everyone else present who wasn't in on the secret must have thought they had all gone mad.

The dark-scaled dragon moved majestically over the sky. He was flying right above the center of the fleet, which effectively prevented even the trickier-happiest catapult crew from trying to take a shot at him. Rule number one of firing a catapult: you do not shoot if there is a risk that the missile will hit friendly targets on its way down.

"I don't believe it", one of the men, who hadn't served under Prince Zuko, stated in astonishment. "My great-grandfather told me stories of the original firebenders, but I never thought I would see one myself."

"It cannot be a real dragon", muttered another. "Not this far north. It must be a trick."

"What if it's an angry spirit?" One of the men, who had served under Zuko, pitched in. Jiri gave him a look.

"Whatever it is, it is real enough, but not a threat to us right now, so we should focus on the actual battle", Lieutenant Jee stated coolheadedly.

ooo

"Sokka! Your dragon... it's gone!"

"What?!" Sokka stopped dead in his tracks and turned toward one of the other young warriors. "What are you talking about? Kulo cannot be dead!"

The boy stopped as well and explained: "Oh no! That's not what I meant! The thing is... when the fleet came into view, the Avatar took off on his bison and went to fight them. So, when the dragon took off as well, we thought it was going to go help the Avatar, but it flew right past him."

Sokka tried to make sense of the tale. "So... Aang is fighting the Fire Nation all by himself?_ Somebody should go help him!"

"But... what about the dragon?"

Kulo wouldn't betray us,_ Sokka's gut reaction told him, and he decided to trust his instinct, no matter how bad the situation looked.

"Kulo is really smart and can look after himself. I bet he's just thought of some way to help us from a distance."

Sokka turned his attention back to the fighting going on around them. Not that you could really call it fighting, when there was so little you could do. The Fire Nation had opened fire on the capital, and even though Sokka had a lot of experience dodging firemissiles, the magnitude of the attack had taken even him by surprise.

The waterbenders had been able to stop some of the missiles before they hit the wall of the city, but for each they stopped, two more got pass them. As the fleet got closer, the missiles began to fly right past the wall and hit the no man's land between the outer and inner wall of the city, and even the buildings of the lower city.

Sokka was grateful they had had the sense and time to evacuate most of the civilians from the city to secret, underground caves behind and under the city. If their defense failed, the people would be left to the mercy of the Fire Nation, but at least they would be out of the immediate line of fire.

Sokka had not felt this useless since that first day when Prince Zuko had crashed his ship into their village. He knew what he had to do, but was still helpless in the face of a much greater foe.

_All I ever wanted was to become a strong warrior like my father, and help my tribe fend off the Fire Nation, but although I've come a long way after meeting Aang and traveling the world, it doesn't appear to make any difference. I really hope that this secret plan to assassinate the Admiral works. There must be more that we can do. There must be more that _I _can do. _

A missile landed some distance from them. Sokka didn't even bat an eye, but the young man he had spoken with earlier dodged all the way to the ground. Sokka turned to give him a hand and help him back on his feet.

Sokka rather felt the heat of the next missile than heard it. Instead of helping the sheepishly smiling boy up, he pushed them both deeper into a snow bank. For a small moment, the air around them appeared to catch fire, but after the missile passed them and hit ice, the fire died down as quickly as it had spread. The air was too cold, and there was almost nothing for the flames to burn.

Sokka got up quickly. He didn't want to be caught off guard twice.

_This is actually kind of silly. The Fire Nation cannot possibly think they are going to win this battle by throwing enough _fire_ at us. They may have greater machines and numbers, but what good will that do to them when we have all the elemental and environmental advantages? _

The land itself is fighting on our side. The North Pole does not want to be conquered by fire.

ooo

General Iroh was standing on the observation deck of the flagship. In front of him, Iroh could see ice and water getting bombarded with fire. The sight was beautiful and devastating all at once.

Iroh worried for his countrymen, if the battle should go badly, and for the Water Tribe, if the battle should go well, but above all, he worried for his nephew. As much as he would've liked to believe that Zuko was somewhere far from harm's way, instinct told him otherwise.

"Look! It's the black dragon!" The ship's lookout shouted to the officers on the observation deck.

Admiral Zhao ran out to the deck's end, Iroh right on his heels.

Uncle let out a breath he hadn't known he had been holding. Zuko was flying with ease, and didn't appear to be injured in any way. Seeing his nephew alive and well, even if only for a moment, eased a burden off Iroh's shoulders.

Beside him, Iroh noticed how Zhao's expression turned to fierce determination. His jaw set tight, Zhao commented to the men around

him: "That dragon is a known accomplice of the Avatar and an enemy to our nation. If an opportunity arises, all troops are to attack it on sight. Though, not at the cost of the campaign. The dragon is a secondary target. Still, he who slays it shall have mine and the Fire Lord's special gratitude."

As much as Zhao wanted the honor of slaying the dragon for himself, he couldn't divert his attention between leading an invasion and chasing a dragon. Apparently, the Admiral had figured out as much, and Iroh had to appreciate the man for keeping his head in the game.

Iroh could only hope that Zuko would have the cunning to steer clear of pursuers, though not all Fire Navy soldiers would have the nerve or the will to attack a dragon, anyway.

The relationship between the Fire Nation and the original firebenders had always been a complex one. Dragons had been feared and respected in varying degrees during their shared history. Although, especially during Iroh's father's reign, dragons had been primarily regarded with hatred and the species had been driven to near extinction, to the next generations, dragons were familiar only from myths and plays, and the magnificent creatures were nowadays often regarded with a sense of nostalgia. Enemy of the nation or not, the dragon was a reminiscent of the glorious days of the past, and Zhao would have a hard time motivating his men to kill it.

Zuko soared right pass them, causing some of the soldiers on the deck to throw firefists at him. As much as firefists weren't going to damage a dragon, Iroh would have preferred Zuko to exhibit more caution and keep his distance. Then Uncle realized that his nephew must have been purposefully taunting this particular ship. Zuko was here for a reason.

Stealthily, the old general made his way out off the observation deck and down a flight of stairs. It would be risky for Zuko to land onboard, but Iroh could not put it past him. His nephew had many good qualities, but being cautious was not one of them.

Uncle made his way to the ship's lower deck through one of the side entrances, arriving on a narrow outside corridor starboard of the main watch tower. Almost as soon as he had arrived there, Zuko circled the ship one last time before attaching himself to it, right next to where Uncle was holding onto a railing for support.

The dragon was hanging on the ships hull, front paws on the side railing, but most of him covered behind the ship itself. Most people on the deck could not see the dragon, and the angle made it difficult for the benders to get a shot at him. The neighboring ships must have had a clear line of sight, but their captains would have to risk sinking the flagship if they gave an order to attack with heavy ammunition.

Zuko's snout came next to Iroh, and the boy gave Uncle a brief, affectionate push. Uncle responded by tapping him on the head. Iroh expected the contact to be followed by a mind link, but instead of reaching for him with a whisker, Zuko turned his head to the side, revealing a scroll hidden just inside the mane on his long neck. Uncle reached for the scroll, and the ribbon holding it in place untangled after a gentle tug. Iroh and Zuko exchanged one more look.

Uncle told his nephew to stay safe, the dragon nodded, and then bolted back up to the sky.

The mighty ship barely swayed at the sudden departure. Only now, most people onboard realized that the dragon had actually landed on their ship.

"Sir! Sir!" A soldier came running from behind a corner. "Are you alright?"

"I am well", Iroh assured him, and in the same motion hid the scroll in one of his sleeves. Good thing he had such voluminous sleeves. "Although the dragon was trying to attack us, I was able to defend myself against him and scare him away."

The soldier who had arrived to protect the General looked impressed.

Zhao, who had apparently gone down the main staircase and arrived at the front deck, walked briskly over to Uncle. "Did you wound it?"

"I... I think I got a few good jabs in, even if I say so myself", Iroh said, but then grimaced and placed a hand on his lower back, "Though I may have twisted my back while attempting a backflip. Nothing like aching muscles to remind a man that his dragon hunting days are long gone."

For emphasis, Iroh rubbed his back and smiled sheepishly.

Zhao looked like he wasn't quite sure what to say, but eventually the man shook his head, turned around and began heading back toward the observation deck, all the while handing out orders. Iroh was torn between excusing himself to go lay down and staying to hear the latest status reports from the other ships, but eventually he decided to stay and hear how the invasion was progressing.

Uncle was eager to read what his nephew had wanted to say to him so badly that he'd risked coming here in person, but the sun had begun to set, and Uncle also wanted to make sure that Zhao would have the good sense to order the fleet to retreat for the night.

It was still early spring, which meant that although winter and the entirely sunless polar nights were over on the Northern Hemisphere, the days were still short and the nights long. From the Fire Nation's point of view, this meant that their already precious few moments of advantage were shorter than they would have been if they had waited until summer, when the midnight sun of the Arctic areas would have ensured nearly unending sunlight.

But, of course, what made right now a good time to invade the North was that the Avatar's arrival had renewed the political will to conquer the Northern Water Tribe. Unfortunately for the soldiers set on the task, the laws of nature were not dictated by politics.

"The Sun is setting", Iroh pointed out the obvious. It was only him and the Admiral on the observation deck now. "Once the Sun sets and the Moon rises, the waterbenders will become nearly unstoppable."

"I am aware of the Moon problem", the Admiral quipped, "And I intend

to take care of it. Though, for now, give the order to retreat. We will commence the fighting at dawn."

A horn signaled that it was time to stop, and the entire fleet slowed down as one, without breaking formation. The bulk of the fleet was still a safe distance from the city.

Uncle continued to advise the Admiral: "I understand that sending out rescue parties to the downed ships is risky, in case the waterbenders see it as a sign of attack, but I would still recommend it. We have no idea how long this siege may take. Our fallen troops have nowhere else to go, just like we have no backup troops coming for us. We are on our own out here, and that is why we must use our resources wisely. Because of the nearly full moon, we will not be able to go get them under the cover of darkness, but I think if we sent some of the smaller ships, the Tribe would not bother with attacking them."

Zhao nodded and gave the order. Iroh looked out to the city, and was frankly a little surprised that the Water tribe wasn't preparing to send out their own ships, now that they had the lunar advantage. Though, perhaps the Tribe needed to rest, or maybe they simply could not afford to go on the offensive and risk losing too many troops. Having a fortification was still their number one advantage against the Fire Nation.

Water was an evasive element, and more to do with counterattacks than attacks. That said, Uncle would be very surprised if the Tribe wasn't up to something tonight. Just because it looked like they weren't doing anything, didn't mean that was the case. Perhaps Zuko's scroll would set some light on that.

"I suggest we double the guard patrols tonight", Uncle stated, "The Tribe might try to take down some of our ships before the night is over. Especially the ones on the edges of the formation are at risk." Iroh's main motivation wasn't to win this battle, and he felt sympathy toward the Water Tribe, but at the same time, he was a military man, born and raised, and he would not do his job poorly.

"Tomorrow", Zhao began, "one of the greatest civilizations of our time will fall. However, they do not know it yet, and for now, I agree with your logic. Although victory is at our grasp, we should not get ahead of ourselves, but be on alert. Desperate people do desperate things."

Uncle bowed and excused himself. Thanks to his status as Zhao's advisor, Uncle had his own private quarters. As soon as he reached them, Iroh took out the scroll his nephew had given him and began reading.

When Iroh got to the end of the letter, he wished he hadn't ordered double security all night long. Though perhaps one more faceless firebender walking around after dark would draw even less attention this way, especially one accompanied by the Dragon of the West himself.

Zuko's plan was innovative, if nothing else, but Uncle still had his doubts. He trusted his nephew's judgement and reasoning, but Iroh also felt that both Nakki and Zuko were underestimating the level of

suspicion Zhao's change of heart would cause in the rest of the command staff.

Though, who knew? Perhaps Nakki could be more decisive and authoritarian than the spirit had so far showcased. Since the plan was already in motion, Iroh saw no reason to not support his nephew in it hundred and ten per cent.

Nakki wouldn't stand a chance of convincing everyone of Zhao's new direction without Iroh's information on Fire Nation's political structure, Fire Navy procedures, and the names and relationships of the people onboard the flagship. The sooner Iroh could begin coaching the would-be leader of the fleet, the better their chances of success were.

Also, once Uncle had had a chat with their new ally, he could decide for himself whether Nakki should be trusted or not. Those were two good reasons to make his way to the secret meeting place mentioned in the letter without further delay.

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After delivering the message to Uncle, Zuko had flown in circles above the fleet and landed on half a dozen other ships. This was mostly to distract the sailors from Iroh's part in all this, but the young man also had another agenda: he was looking for his crew.

So far, Zuko had had no luck. The fleet was gigantic, and Zuko wasn't sure what type of ship his crew was serving on, or if they were even all on the same ship. Getting close enough to make out faces had its risks, and he was anyways starting to get tired of scaring people senseless for no reason.

Once the sun set, Zuko sighed and flew back towards the Water Tribe capital. The city had gained many new scars, but Zuko's attention was almost automatically drawn to the half-sunken ships outside the city. Had one of them belonged to his crew?

Zuko stopped for a moment to observe the scene, but then forced himself to move on. Even if there was still someone alive in the water, and in need of immediate rescue, Zuko could not help them and expect to be welcomed back among the Water Tribe and Avatar's lot after.

Zuko's plan did not lean on maintaining the Avatar's trust, but the situation was very unpredictable, and somebody needed to keep a close eye on the airbender. Even if his plan worked and the fleet turned around, what was there to stop the Tribe from going after them? Despite Zuko's unique powers, his greatest strength did not lie in bending or flight, but in his inside information of the enemy.

Irrationally, Zuko wished he could just fly back to every ship and warn them all that this was a bad idea and probably all part of Koh's evil plan, but he knew he would not do anyone any favors by instigating mutinies on some of the ships. 'Convincing Zhao' was the only way.

Zuko landed on the icy plateau between the outer and inner wall of the city, only to be immediately tied down by pillars of ice.

_Okay, so much for that hard-earned trust. _Zuko could barely believe he had allowed himself to get so distracted. He growled at the group of waterbenders around him.

"And where have you been, Master Kulo?" Pakku asked and walked over to him. "Reporting back to your allies, perhaps?"

Before Zuko had a chance to reply, a voice rang out: "Wait!"

Master Pakku turned to look at Sokka with a bored expression. "Yes. Was there something you wanted to say on behalf of your suspiciously acting friend?"

Sokka had apparently run the whole way, and nearly doubled over in exhaustion. He lifted one finger and managed between gasped breaths: "Yep. I know why â€" Kulo flew â€" out there."

Pakku crossed his arms. "Then do enlighten the rest of us."

"I told him to go there", Sokka said and straightened. "That's right. I sent Kulo to... count the ships."

Pakku raised a dubious eyebrow. "_You_ asked him to...?"

"Yep. I did. We need to know more about the enemy and their defenses and stuff."

Pakku looked surprisingly calm. He was probably annoyed and still dubious, but intended to out-argue Sokka rather than out-yell him. "It was your friend here who told us about the fleet to begin with. Since he has seen it before, was there really a need for a double-check now? Especially when we can _all_ see them out there."

Sokka walked over to Zuko's side: "What reason would I have to lie to you? Also, if Kulo really is a traitor, why did he come back?"

The waterbenders looked around each other and one of them even shrugged.

Sokka was encouraged by this: "Come on. We all saw that the Fire Nation was surprised and unhappy to see the black dragon, their long-time enemy who has helped the Avatar escape from their clutches on several occasions."

Now Sokka was plain lying, and Zuko had no idea why.

Pakku sighed and waved his arm once, releasing Zuko from the ice prison. "Fine. But if you feel like doing something like this again, tell us first."

The 'or else' was left unsaid but Zuko and Sokka both knew it was there. Pakku and the waterbenders glided away, and Zuko could only look in amazement at the ease with which they bended the ice around them.

Sokka turned to Zuko, and to the Prince's surprise, he wasn't smiling widely after a trick well played. Sokka looked furious.

"Mind telling me where the hell you have been?!" the Water Tribe boy hissed under his breath. "And don't you think that you'll get away with this without having to explain yourself just because I covered for you. I didn't have to do that, you know. Actually, I should be keeping Princess Yue safe, not saving your ass. The least you owe me is an explanation!"

Not knowing what else to do, Zuko wrote on the ground. "I am sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cover it. Do you have any idea how worried I was?" Sokka exclaimed.

Zuko blinked. "Worried? For me?"

"Yes for you! Who else?" Sokka rolled his eyes.

"...Why?"

"Because you are my friend", Sokka huffed, and added, "Spirits, you can be so _stupid_ sometimes."

_Because I am his friend, _Zuko thought, and decided that it was time he trusted his friend with what was really going on. Well, at least a part of it.

Sokka sighed and turned around: "Come on. Let's head back to the palace. I need to find Yue, and you have to stay within my line of sight at all..."

Sokka's voice faded out mid-sentence when Zuko created a mindlink between them. This was too complicated and important to be communicated through writing.

What the...' Sokka thought.

_You are right. I owe you an explanation. And a thank you. And maybe an apology', _Zuko communicated. _But most importantly, I have to warn you: do not go along on this secret mission to assassinate Zhao. It won't work.'_

Okay, I'll bite: why? And how do you even know about the secret mission to...?' Sokka asked.

_I'm inside your mind', _Zuko said, and although that wasn't actually much of an explanation, since having Power of Dragons didn't mean that Zuko knew everything Sokka did, the Prince hoped it would do for now.

Nakki hadn't told Zuko that Sokka was one of the volunteers to go on the secret mission, but the dragon knew the boy well enough to have guessed he was. Sokka's reaction only confirmed it.

And why shouldn't we kill the good Admiral?' Sokka asked again.

Because it won't work. You won't get to him, and even if you do, his second in command will merely finish what he started. It will be a lot of trouble over nothing.'

Sokka crossed his arms and huffed: _'Okay, there is a risk of that, but at least we are trying something.'_

Zuko took in a deep breath. Here goes for nothing. _'I have a better plan. It is to do with why I flew over to see the Fire Navy.'_

Sokka straightened up. _'You do? Why didn't you tell us?'_

_ 'I am telling you now. Besides, the plan only works if the Fire Nation doesn't find out about it, so the less people know about it the better.'_

Sokka frowned._ 'You could have still told _us_.'_

_ 'I know. My bad. Now can I tell you the secret plan?'_

_ 'Shoot.'_

Zuko hesitated. _'I have an ally. Inside the Fire Navy.'_

"What?!" Sokka yelled aloud. "How could you? I trusted you."

_ 'Shh. He is on our side. He wants to help us. He is' (Sorry Uncle) 'a traitor. He is not on the Fire Nation's side.'_

Sokka's eyes sharpened, and he nodded. _'Who?'_

_ 'Someone who works on the flagship. Someone close to Zhao. My ally plans to assassinate Admiral Zhao tonight. Then he will impersonate the Admiral and order the fleet to leave in the morning.' _

Zuko decided not to name anyone, and he was cutting a few corners, but that was, in essence, the plan.

Sokka looked dubious. _'And how is this plan better than what the Tribe has going for them?'_

_ 'My ally can dispose of the Admiral quietly, take his place, and order the fleet to return to Earth Kingdom. The difference is that this won't just slow down the Fire Nation momentarily; this will prevent the battle entirely. If everything goes as planned, the navy should retreat tomorrow.'_

_ 'How exactly does your ally intend to pass himself off as Zhao?'_

_ 'It is... a little hard to explain, but trust me when I tell you that this is the best bad plan anyone has going for them at the moment. I have given it a lot of thought, and this way, we can save the most lives.'_

Sokka frowned. _'Who's side are you on, anyway?'_

Zuko smiled. _'Believe it or not, I am on the side of humanity.'_

Sokka rolled his eyes. _'Maybe you _should_ be Aang's dragon. You two have so much in common, especially as cryptic, important-sounding non-answers go.'_

Zuko smiled even wider, and pushed Sokka gently with his snout.
'Thank you for believing in me.'

'Uh. No problem.' Sokka scratched the back of his head awkwardly, taken off guard by the compassionate gesture.

Zuko felt his cheeks blushing, and quickly broke the connection.
That came out a bit too friendly. Seriously, the things I let out of my mind.

Still, Zuko was happy and relieved that he still had Sokka's trust, even after telling him the truth. A part of the truth. Perhaps not the most important part, but it was a good beginning, all the same.

"Sooo..." Sokka drawled, and then went on quickly, "We should definitely head for the palace, you know, before our friends get worried."

Zuko nodded. Sokka turned to walk away but Zuko stepped in front of him, lowered his neck and gave Sokka a meaningful look.

"Really? Awesome."

The travel took only a moment, and then Zuko landed on one of the palace's many balconies.

Sokka jumped down and turned to address Zuko. "Oh, and for your information, I wasn't even on the secret mission to go kill Zhao anymore."

Zuko lifted his eyebrow. Sokka continued: "That's right. The Chief decided that I was too competent and valuable to be wasted on small things, and gave me a more important secret mission: keeping Princess Yue safe."

Zuko smiled at Sokka's good fortune, but was also reminded of his own task of keeping a close eye on the Avatar. Luckily, it wasn't very difficult for him to think of an excuse to make to Sokka. He wrote on the ground: "Where are Aang and Katara? I have to tell them of the new plan at once."

"Right. True." Sokka looked thoughtful. "Well, the last I saw them, they were hanging out with Yue, so maybe they are still somewhere here together."

Zuko looked at Sokka incredulously, and wrote: "You have no idea where Yue, Katara or Aang are at the moment."

Sokka did not look amused. "What?! I was busy covering for you, remember? It's a big city and I can't keep an eye on everyone at once."

Zuko tried to look apologetic. Before they had time to go look for anyone, though, Yue arrived on the balcony. "Sokka! There you are!"

"Princess Yue, are you alright?" Sokka immediately turned his attention to his loved one, and took her hand.

"I am fine. I was just worried for you", Yue said, and then the two looked at each other dreamily. After a moment of this, Zuko coughed loudly.

When the two lovebirds noticed that he was still there, Zuko wrote: "Where is the Avatar? Wasn't he with you?"

Yue looked surprised that Zuko could write, but Sokka got his head in the game. "Right. We need to find Aang. Do you know where he is?"

"I... I was actually on my way to tell you: the Avatar has gone to the Spirit World to ask for help and guidance from the Great Spirits", Yue explained, still mostly to Sokka.

Zuko let out an angry hiss that made both of the youngsters jump a bit.

_Stunts like this one are the reason why I was supposed to keep an eye on that kid, _Zuko thought angrily. He could only imagine the disaster that would follow if the ever-trusting Aang went to the wrong spirits for help. Hell, even if the boy asked help from all the right spirits, it could mean disaster for the Fire Nation. Zuko couldn't follow the Avatar to the Spirit World, but he would have to find some way to stop Aang right now. Whatever it took.

Zuko wrote a single, angry word: "Where?"

"Right" Sokka pitched in, "The last time Aang went to the Spirit World, his body was left behind, completely helpless. Where is Aang _physically_?"

Yue looked between them and said: "Katara is with him right now, and she thinks she can handle it, but just in case, I came here to get more people to guard him."

"Show the way", Sokka said.

Yue hesitated. "I took Aang to the most sacred and spiritual place in the North Pole. It is the culmination of the spiritual energy of the people of water, and only a trusted few are allowed to enter."

Now she turned to directly address Zuko. "It is forbidden for benders of other elements than water to enter."

Yue turned to Sokka again: "On a more practical note, there are some very rare, sacred fish in the place, and since fish is what dragons eat, I am not sure we should..."

Zuko had had enough of talking. He pushed Sokka a bit out of the way and created a connection to Yue's mind.

After the initial confusion that always came when connecting with an entirely new, foreign mind, Zuko could see a glimpse of Aang suggesting that they ask the spirits to send out 'an incredible spirit attack... or for some counsel'.

That was all Zuko needed to know. That kid had way more power than sense.

Then Zuko tried to see where Aang was, so he followed Yue's memory of taking Aang and Katara to the sacred place. However, the connection kept failing. There was static and Zuko thought he could hear a distant hum, which drowned out what was going on in Yue's memory. It all sort of reminded Zuko of how it felt like to connect with a spirit's, not a person's mind, but that made o sense at all.

After great effort and struggle, Zuko could see a round door, but the moment he tried to walk through it, there was a blinding, white light, and he was pushed out of Yue's mind completely.

When the connection was broken, Zuko still had to shake his head to clear his thoughts. Hazily, he realized that someone was tucking at his foot, and Sokka's alarmed voice finally registered. "...I don't care how you do it in Dragonville, but here in the real world, this is not how friends treat friends."

Zuko stepped a way from both of the teenagers, and swayed a bit on his feet. To his great surprise, Princess Yue looked a little shocked but otherwise no worse for wear. Sokka asked something from the Princess, but Zuko tuned them out.

His mind still felt muddy. A mindlink shouldn't have had such an effect on a practiced user of the Power of Dragons. It made no sense, but Zuko didn't have the time to dwell on the matter. Nor did he have to. He had learned everything he really needed to know. He had seen where the door was, and it didn't really matter what was on the inside, because Zuko would see it for himself soon enough.

The black dragon opened his swings, swayed on his feet one more time, tried not to hear the alarm and warning in Sokka's voice, and rose to the sky.

Getting back in the air actually helped a bit. Zuko's mind felt a touch clearer after he took off. The sacred place was quite a walking distance away, but that meant nothing to a creature that could fly. He would get there in a matter of moments if he just didn't loose his way.

Zuko circled around the palace. Everything looked a bit different from air, but after a few sweeps, Zuko got his bearings straight and began heading for the Avatar. He soon noticed a round, wooden door directly behind the palace, apparently leading inside the sheet of ice that surrounded the city. Zuko wasn't sure he could fit through the small doorway, but thankfully, it didn't look like he would have to.

The door must have lead to a cave inside the ice, but from bird perspective Zuko could see an opening in the cave's roof some distance from the entrance. With any luck, that was where Aang would be, and all Zuko had to do was fly in.

When Zuko got closer, he could see that the roofless cave had running water and... grass? Really?

More importantly, though, Zuko could see a boy clad in orange. Aang was hard to miss, since his eyes and tattoos were glowing a blue light.

Oh no! Am I too late already?

Zuko still remembered painfully well what had happened the last time he had briefly gone against the Avatar while the monk was in the Avatar state, but he couldn't let that discourage him.

Zuko now was flying above the cave, though still far up in the sky. He wanted to take one more look before actually landing. However, the moment Zuko swooped closer to the grassy meadow below him, something changed.

The closest Zuko could describe it was that it felt like diving into water. All sounds became muffled and distant, and he could no longer feel the wind on his face. Instead he felt warm water surround him on all sides. Even flying felt more like floating, and although the sensation wasn't entirely unpleasant, Zuko had a bad feeling about this.

The water was invisible, but intrusive, all the same. At first, the whole thing felt mostly cleansing as the water rushed past him, but soon the sensation grew uncomfortable. It was like the water was seeping all the way into his soul and chi.

And then the water was gone, and Zuko was in free fall. He tried to open his wings, only to realize that he no longer had them. He had turned back to a human.

"Aaaahhh!"

Zuko's less than dignified yell was cut out by a loud splash, as he fell flat on his face into a pond inside the grassy clearing.

Because of the surface tension, Zuko's fall ended abruptly, but he didn't sink in very deep. He felt like throwing up, except that he couldn't even take a breath while still submerged. Thankfully, the pond was shallow, and he was close to it's edge. To reach the surface, all Zuko had to do was to scramble to all fours. He coughed out the water and crawled back to the safety of dry land.

When Zuko climbed out of the water, he noticed a familiar set of leather-clad feet in a bending stance not too far from his current position.

"Prince Zuko! How did _you_ get here?"

Zuko was too tired to even become annoyed. "For the record, this is not what it looks like."

"You are here to capture the Avatar", Katara said. She looked angry and determined, but there was some hesitation in her voice.

_Katara hates everything to do with the Fire Nation, and me specifically, for attacking her village, trying to capture Aang, reading her mind, and probably for killing her mother, as well. _But..._ from Katara's point of view, we have not seen each other in ages, and she is not entirely sure what me showing up here means._

Zuko figured he would probably get one shot at convincing Katara of

his good intentions. Better make it count.

He lifted his hands slowly in a surrendering gesture, and got on his knees. "Katara... I am not here to capture Aang. I am sort of not even with the Fire Nation anymore."

Katara made a disbelieving noise, and took a wider stance. "You are the Prince of the Fire Nation."

The situation was slipping through his fingers like water, but Zuko tried to hold on to it anyway. He was out of breath, out of his game and a terrible liar, and he couldn't think of anything better to say than the truth.

For a moment, he considered starting off by telling her that he was actually Kulo, their friend. Then he thought better of it.

Presuming Katara would even believe him, the revelation was unlikely to make her trust him more. And it was, all in all, really off the point, so instead Zuko quickly explained: "I am here to help you. I am here to warn you. Aang doesn't know what he is doing. He is making a big mistake. He's going to destroy everything."

Katara raised a sizable wave of water behind her, held it up, and commented: "Everything for us, or everything for your plans of getting home?"

"For everyone!" Zuko huffed in frustration. That stung. "Look, I am really not here to capture the Avatar. I am only here to stop him from going to the spirits for help."

Zuko didn't have to see Katara's eyes harden to know he had just blown it.

Telling the truth isn't really working out for me, is it? was all Zuko had time to think before Katara released the wave.

35. Living in Different Worlds

****A/N****

So, another chapter! Sorry about the long waits. I have no idea where the time has gone. I will try to update faster. Thank you to all my new and old readers for your encouraging feedback, and for your patience. Your reviews make my day!

(())(())

****35. Living in Different Worlds****

Zuko scrambled to his feet and tried to muster some form of defensive kata, or even just dodge the hit, but there wasn't enough time. The water crashed over him. When Zuko regained his sense of direction, he found himself yet again sprawled on the ground, just at the opposite side of the clearing.

"Are you sure you want a rematch?" Katara quipped, "I should warn you: I am no longer that scared little girl you remember. I can fend for myself."

To emphasize her words, Katara gathered another impressive stream of water, and hurled it at Zuko with all her might.

_Yeah. I know, _Zuko thought, and rolled to the side. Katara was too fast and there was too much water; Zuko did not get entirely out of the way, and lost his footing again.

"I am not going to let you hurt Aang," Katara declared.

"Great, since I am not here to hurt Aang," Zuko shot back.

Katara was strong. Zuko wasn't sure whether it was because of the spiritual power of the Oasis, the lunar advantage, or her protective love over the Avatar, but she was really on fire tonight.

Still, for some reason, Katara took a pause in her attacks. Zuko had time to get up on his feet and into a bending stance.

Zuko thought about taking out his Dao swords. He had left the rope and most of his other belongings in Kulo's lair before sneaking out to his meeting with Nakki, but Zuko had not dared to leave such a recognizable, obviously Fire Nation weapon laying around. Good thinking, considering that the very next morning Sokka had gone by Kulo's igloo while looking for him.

Even if the kid would not recognize the swords as Fire Nation weapons, he would still know they were not from the Water Tribe, and that could raise awkward questions.

Zuko was a good sword fighter, but without an element of surprise on his side, he would probably still need his bending to take down Katara. Zuko did not have more time to think about what to do, so he decided to take Uncle's advice, and rely on his basics. No swords, then.

Zuko started with a simple fire jab, but the small flame sizzled away before it even reached Katara. Zuko's face fell. Katara giggled.

The Prince felt his cheeks get color. He chose to think it was just the frustration coursing through his veins.

You have got to be kidding me. Destiny couldn't find a more inconvenient moment for a bending breakdown?

Zuko could still try to use his swords or one of his hidden knives, but he seriously doubted they would be enough to catch Katara by surprise. Besides, Zuko was not here to defeat Katara. He was here to stop Aang from making a mistake, and surely that was something Katara wanted, too. He just needed to convince her to trust him.

The Prince decided to try a different approach, one he virtually never even contemplated; Zuko lifted both of his hands up in surrender.

"You got me", the Prince said, albeit through gritted teeth.

Katara looked dubious. "What do you think you are doing?"

"What does it look like? I am admitting defeat. You are right. You

got me beat here."

Katara frowned, and stated slowly: "You are playing some kind of game."

"Oh, yeah? Then what is my big end plot? In case you haven't noticed, I haven't an ounce of firebending left in me. I am completely at your mercy."

The last part was not entirely true; Zuko could not use his firebending, but that did not mean he was completely defenseless. Hopefully, Katara would not think to question that logic.

Katara's face remained stern, but her eyes brightened a notch. Zuko could hardly believe that this approach just might get Katara to stop attacking him and start listening.

"Look," Zuko said, his hands still in the air. "I know this looks bad, but you have to believe me when I tell you that I am not here to capture the Avatar. Think about it: why would I have risked my life and come all this way, just to pick a fight, while I am without my bending. I know I cannot defeat you or the Avatar, so I am not here to defeat either of you. I am only here to talk Aang out of making a big mistake that will put all our lives in jeopardy."

For a moment, Katara looked like she was really considering his words. Then she answered: "Okay. Let's pretend for one minute that I have any reason to believe that you would want to help us, or do something for the general good of everyone, for that matter..."

"Hey!" Zuko said and frowned.

Katara crossed her arms. "Oh, come on! You would literally do anything, no matter how immoral, to have your father's love and be allowed to go back to the Fire Nation. You don't care about 'collateral damage', which means you don't really care about anyone."

And how does she even know about me and my father? Well, I guess it is not a state secret. Maybe they have been asking around about me. Makes me feel sort of... like I matter to them.

Zuko crossed his arms as well: "Okay, let's just presume that something so bad is going to happen that even the Evil Prince Zuko cares. Now finish the sentence."

Zuko was not that person anymore, but he had no need to convince Katara of it. Katara did not know him before, when he was closer to the person she had just described, and she did not know him now. Just because she wanted to showoff with her ignorance did not mean that Zuko owed her an explanation. Also, there was no time for the long version, nor any reason to think she would believe it.

Katara looked unhappy, but she went on: "Okay. What is it? What is so damn important that the Evil Prince Zuko, your words, not mine, would give up a chance to chase personal glory and capture the Avatar?"

Zuko took a deep breath, trying to reign in his ever-growing

frustration and anger. This was not going well, but it was better than nothing.

"I am here," Zuko stated evenly, "Because I know from a reliable source that there is an evil spirit out there, and he is trying to trick the Avatar into unleashing a 'massive spirit attack' on the Fire Nation fleet. Look, I just know bad things will come of it, and I cannot... We cannot let Aang do that."

So, Zuko cut a few corners, but that was essentially what he had come here to say. The Prince took a deep breath and looked up to see how Katara would react.

Katara actually laughed. "You know, I do believe you. I believe that you would have come here to prevent Aang from getting help to defeat the Fire Nation."

"Katara, stop being such a child!" Zuko yelled. He could tell from the shock on Katara's face that he had struck a nerve, but went on anyway: "Do you really think that crossing your fingers and hoping that a higher power saves you is going to solve something? You really think that the spirits care about who wins this battle? If the spirits truly care about justice and harmony, where were they when the Air Nomads got wiped out?"

"I am not saying that spirits do not exist, or that they never interfere with human lives, but that does not mean you can trust them. You know why? Because spirits do not care about you, or me, or about anyone, and if a spirit does unleash a massive spirit attack today, it will have nothing to with helping the Water Tribe. Spirits are not helpful, and spirits do not care about people. Not as a rule, anyway ."

When Katara answered, her voice was eerily calm: "You know, for a moment there, I actually thought you were here to help us..."

"Katara, I did not mean..." Zuko tried to say, but he could feel the moment slipping away. This wasn't a matter of miscommunication, or that their tempers were getting the best of them. The problem was that Zuko and Katara lived in different worlds, and there was nothing Zuko could do to change that right now.

"No. Don't apologize," Katara said. "In fact, I should thank you for opening my eyes, and reminding me why it is so important that we stop the Fire Nation right now, before they do more irreparable damage to the world. And you... I mean, I knew you were messed up, but I never took you for someone who has no respect for the spirits."

Zuko had managed to get Katara to stop attacking, but that did not mean that she believed him. Actually, this whole thing had been a massive waste of time. Katara was probably the last person in the world to think ill of the spirits, let alone based on Zuko's word.

What am I doing? I cannot surrender and hand myself over to the Avatar's lot. Even if I could convince them of my good intentions while their prisoner, it would take too long. I have to stop the Avatar from doing something he will regret, and I need to do it

right now. If the only way to do that is by going through Katara, so be it._

Zuko glanced around himself for ideas. _If I wait too long, Sokka and Yue are going to get here, and they will take me as a prisoner of the Water Tribe. I cannot let that happen._

Zuko realized that his thoughts must have been plainly written on his face, since Katara's expression hardened, and she started forming another attack.

Zuko tried one more time to talk his way out of this: "Wait! Didn't you hear anything I said? I am not here to hurt you, and I am completely defenseless!"

"Maybe," Katara replied, "but you are still too dangerous to be left free, and I don't happen to have any rope with me, so..."

Zuko took a deep breath, concentrated, and tried one last time to reach for his firebending. Nothing. The spirit Oasis, or maybe even the spirits themselves, must have really messed with his chi.

Time for Plan B, then. Zuko reached for the Dao on his back, but at the same time, a massive wave of water tossed Zuko to the wall.

The Prince knew what would happen next; he had seen Katara practice this move in a training fight. Soon, Katara would freeze the water, leaving Zuko hanging on the wall like a macabre ornament.

Come on, Zuko! Stop whining and get your act together! So what if you do not have firebending right now? The greatness of a warrior does not depend on his ability to bend. You have faced worse odds before; you took on the Pohuai Strogghold on your own. You are a master ninja, for crying out loud.

The water pushing Zuko to the wall made it hard to move, but Zuko knew that, in order to freeze the water, Katara would have to slow it down first.

Moving water does not freeze, no matter how cold the air gets.

The moment Zuko felt the rush of water calm down, he reached up and out of the water with both of his hands. Over his shoulders, Zuko grabbed hold of a small ice ledge on the uneven wall behind him. Then he placed his feet on the wall, and with all his might, kicked his body upward.

For a moment, Zuko thought he was not going to make it. Katara could freeze water very fast. However, the water of the Oasis was much warmer than any of the water Katara had practiced this trick with, and so it also took her longer to freeze it. This gave Zuko just enough time to get a steady grasp on the wall, and kick his feet over his head and his whole body out of the water.

A moment later, the water froze, and Zuko's somersault landed on an icy slide. Zuko's feet slipped on the ice, and the boy slid back to ground level. Not his greatest landing of all time, but Zuko was determined to make it count.

By the time Zuko slid on to the grass, he had a throwing knife in

hand.

Katara looked stunned. Zuko threw one of his hidden knives at her right arm, and the sleeve of her dress caught. There was nothing directly behind Katara, so she did not get trapped to a wall. However, the strong fabric of her sleeve did not tear, and instead, the sudden pull of the knife caused her to lose balance.

Not exactly text book, Zuko thought, and cringed.

Even though she was on the ground, Katara was able to put together a bending attack. It was not as big as the previous ones, and Zuko was able to dodge it.

The effect the Spirit Oasis had had on Zuko appeared to be wearing off. The Prince still did not have his bending, but otherwise, Zuko felt more clearheaded by the minute.

Zuko ran towards Katara, reached for his Dao and pulled them out mid stride. Zuko did not want to injure Katara, but broadswords were useful in a situation like this, because they were specifically designed to be used for hitting people, not slicing them. Zuko still needed to get close to Katara to be able to put the swords in good use, though.

Zuko jumped to the side a few times to stay out of Katara's line of fire. However, the closer he got, the better her chances of hitting him were.

Katara was a strong, talented, and motivated bender, and there was plenty of water for her to use. However, waterbending style of fighting took time, and, to Zuko's knowledge, Katara had never been separately trained in any form of close combat. Katara was known for being very creative, but it still stood to presume that hand-to-hand was her weakest point.

Katara realized what he was up to, and focused on her aim. At this distance, Zuko did not even try to dodge, but relied on his swords instead. Zuko was not used to deflecting water, but it turned out to be fairly similar to deflecting fire.

Katara looked shocked, and Zuko launched forward. He jumped past Katara, trying to hit her on the head with the hilt of the sword.

Katara ducked just in time. Zuko turned around quickly, but so did she.

Zuko and Katara exchanged a few hand-to-hand moves. Although Katara had a mean roundhouse kick, this close up, the Dao gave Zuko an enormous advantage. Katara realized this, too.

While Katara's attention was on the swords, Zuko kicked her on the chest, and she fell down at his feet.

Here we go again, Zuko thought. He was tempted to glance at Aang to make sure that this time, the Avatar would not come to Katara's aid, but thought better of it.

Katara tried to kick Zuko below the belt, but Zuko noticed her

movement, and lowered one of the swords by reflex. The sword sliced Katara's calf.

"AAAWHH!"

"Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

Katara glared up at him: "I should never have stopped to listen to you."

Katara made a small hand gesture. Zuko racked his brain to remember what that bending move was used for, and turned around just in time to shatter an ice spike headed his way.

Before Katara would think to do anything else, Zuko hit her on the head with the flat of his sword. Katara was knocked out cold.

Zuko looked around himself to see if there were any other attackers nearby. The Avatar's eyes still glowed in a eerie fashion, but the boy made no motion to indicate that he was aware of his surroundings. Other than that, Zuko was alone.

Zuko knelt down to check Katara's pulse, take a look at the cut on her leg, and inspect the bump on her head. Luckily, the cut wasn't deep. Zuko still took the scarf from around his neck and used it to make a temporary bandage. Zuko was in a hurry, but this was his fault, and thus his responsibility.

Oh, hell. She is never going to forgive me for this. That's what you get for using real blades when fighting a friend. A sort of friend. Who am I kidding? We may not be very close, but I don't have many friends, so they all count.

Zuko got up and assessed his situation. He had to talk to Aang, and to do that, the Avatar needed to be awoken.

He walked over to Aang, and called his name. When that didn't work, Zuko shook the boy by the shoulders, yelled at him, and even slapped him across the face. No reaction from Aang.

Oh great. The boy was really out of it, and Zuko was running out of ideas.

For a brief moment, Zuko wondered if he could follow the Avatar into the Spirit World, but he had a feeling that that wasn't something Dragon Warriors were able to do. Nor did it sound like a good idea, or something Zuko wanted to try.

Zuko needed to wake Aang. Actually, Zuko wasn't even sure it was healthy for Aang to be awoken right now, not that Zuko even knew how.

Great. Now what?

Sokka and Yue could arrive any moment, expecting to find Kulo. Zuko could not use his firebending, any form of it, so he could not turn into a dragon at the moment. That meant that Sokka and Yue would instead find Katara bleeding on the ground, and Prince Zuko harassing the Avatar.

I need to get out of here, but I can't leave without Aang. So yes, I am going to capture the Avatar. Heck. With any luck, Aang might snap out of it when I remove him from the Spirit Oasis. Even if he doesn't, I can at least keep an eye on him.

Zuko certainly hoped that the effect the Oasis had had on _his_ bending would wear after he left.

Zuko hoisted Aang on his shoulders, but stopped to look at Katara's unmoving form. _If I leave her, she will tell any pursuers exactly who to look for, but I cannot carry them both and stay undercover at the same time. I'll have to leave her here, and hope she comes to before the battle commences at dawn. _

_Actually, with any luck, there won't be any battle tomorrow, because "Admiral Zhao" will have had a change of heart by then. All I need to do is babysit the Avatar until Uncle and Nakki are done with their part of the plan. _

The Prince looked around himself for the door he had seen in Yue's memories. He found it fairly easily. Zuko opened the door, stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and did not look back.

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"Welcome onboard the flagship, mighty water spirit," Uncle greeted quietly but formally. He bowed his head, though his eyes did not leave the spirit.

"Hello," Nakki answered and waved one hand at him. "How did you know it was me?"

Many soldiers had passed by Iroh while he waited for the spirit at the rendezvous point mentioned in Zuko's letter. Uncle had begun to worry that something had gone wrong, and the spirit wasn't coming, or that he simply could not tell apart the impostor from ordinary crewmen, but in the end, recognizing Nakki wasn't all that hard.

In his Fire Nation uniform and skull mask, Nakki looked the part. He also walked in the right manner, but his greeting when encountering a superior officer had been sluggish. The spirit would have undoubtedly gotten away with such behavior on most ships in this fleet, but not on the flagship.

"The first lesson you need to know about Admiral Zhao: he is strict about protocol, and cannot stand procrastination," Uncle stated. To Iroh's relief, Nakki, who had now removed his face plate to reveal an unremarkable, Fire-Nation-looking face, looked fascinated by this information. The spirit seemed to be memorizing every word.

"My greeting," Nakki eventually said, squinting his eyes a bit. "There is something wrong with my greeting, yes?"

Uncle gestured for Nakki to put his mask back on, and to walk with him. So far, neither of them had said anything condemnable, but once they started talking about things with their real names, Uncle wanted to be somewhere where he would be sure that no one would be listening.

Nakki followed Uncle's lead without the slightest hesitation. For a moment, they walked in silence.

"General Iroh, may I inquire where we are headed?" Nakki eventually broke the silence.

"To my cabin. As far as anyone is concerned, your name is Sergeant Liu, and I have invited you over for a friendly game of Pai Sho. A wise man once said: there is nothing like playing a board game to get your mind of impending battle."

Nakki nodded, and Uncle was pretty sure that he was smirking under the face plate. Most people found situations involving deceit stressful, but the spirit appeared to be enjoying himself.

"I could not agree more, Sir", Nakki replied. "Although I do wonder, if we have time for... games?"

"This one will be very short, but educational."

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"Heh, my bending is back!" Zuko rejoiced out loud. Granted, the flame he had been able to produce was tiny, especially considering how much effort it had taken to create it. Still, it was a good sign. Slowly but surely, his firebending was returning to him.

That wasn't even the only thing Zuko had to be thankful for. He had, after all, managed to sneak through a city under siege without being spotted.

For a moment, Zuko had seriously considered staying away from the city all together. It was risky to walk around the heavily-patrolled streets while carrying the "beacon of light for all the world" on his back. On the other hand, there had been nowhere else to run to.

The glaciers weren't safe, and Zuko had guessed his chances of staying alive were better if he stayed within the Water Tribe capital.

So good so far. Even though it was still a mayhem out on the streets, or maybe because of it, Zuko had evaded attention, and found an abandoned house well out of the way, but with a clear view on the plain between the city wall and the city itself.

Well, what was left of the city wall, anyway. The structure had taken quite a hammering from the catapults. By the looks of the wall, the Northern Capital could not stand many more days like the previous one.

Since his bending was still acting out, Zuko was shivering in cold, but he did not dare start a fire to keep himself warm. The Avatar did not appear to feel the cold, but then again, he was still oblivious to the world around him in general. As far as Zuko could tell, leaving the Oasis had not disturbed Aang's trip to the Spirit World.

Well, let's hope Aang is doing something useful. That would make one of us.

It was frustrating that there was nothing Zuko could do but wait. And wait he did. He waited for Aang to awaken, or for the dawn to break.

When he was feeling optimistic, Zuko even expected the fleet to turn around and leave any minute now. When he was feeling particularly pessimistic, he just waited for someone to discover him.

Maybe it was all for the best that he still could not turn into a dragon. Had he been able to do that, Zuko was not sure he would have been able to resist flying out to get a closer look of what was going on with the fleet and with his uncle.

Zuko rubbed his hands together, and blew in them. There was only a flicker of flame in his breath of fire, but it was better than nothing. Gradually, he began to feel a weariness creeping up his tired muscles, but he couldn't afford to rest now. He had to keep an eye on the Avatar.

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Zuko's head snapped, and he had to blink several times. The environment around him was suddenly much brighter. He must have fallen asleep after all, because the first streams of sunlight could already be seen in the horizon. Zuko cursed under his breath and looked around to locate Aang, but thankfully the boy was still where Zuko had left him.

Battles horns blared somewhere in the distance. Zuko realized that that was the sound that had awoken him.

Zuko cursed and looked out to the sea. Sure enough, the fleet was preparing to continue their attack.

"No," Zuko mumbled under his breath. "It can't be."

But of course, it could. This meant that something had gone awry with the plan.

"Uncle," Zuko whispered.

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****Five Hours Earlier****

Something was bothering Zhao, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. It was not any one thing, like those Water Tribe children, who had been caught sneaking onboard the flagship, but rather a general foreboding. Whatever it was, though, it was giving him a headache.

Zhao was sitting in his office onboard the flagship. Usually, this was one of the calmest rooms onboard, and thus a good place for some thinking. Unfortunately at the moment, the Admiral's cabin was far from a quiet and peaceful surrounding, because it was filled with people. And they were not even the sort of people who were close in rank to Zhao, and knew when to shut up, but most of them were common sailors from all around the fleet. They were here because of one of the most annoying reasons: they wanted to look important.

It was Zhao's own fault, really. He had had a feeling that Iroh, his main advisor on dragons, was too softhearted a fool to be trusted to tell him everything he needed to know about killing dragons. However, so long as Zhao himself knew almost nothing of the subject, he could not catch Iroh lying to him, or prove that the old General was withholding crucial information. To catch Iroh redhanded, Zhao needed proof of his treachery. Hence this midnight gathering.

After ordering the fleet to halt for the night, Zhao had issued another order: all personnel, who knew something useful or important about dragons, or about one black dragon in particular, were to come forth right now. However, Zhao really should have worded the invitation more carefully.

Now the Admiral's office had been visited by dozens of career climbers, eager to impress with facts every Fire Nation citizen knew, and equally many superstitious nut jobs, who had come all this way to tell him that seeing a black dragon was a bad omen, and that they were all doomed.

One or two sailors had actually provided him with useful information, like that the dragon they had seen earlier that day was relatively young, and that dragons were immune to many forms of firebending, but not to all of them. Also, dragons never came this far north for no reason, and the most likely reason was that this dragon had been ordered to come here. So, the dragon had a master.

Despite the respectable number of people taking Zhao for a fool tonight, the Admiral was not an idiot. Actually, he had been thinking a lot recently. Mostly about his destiny, but also about all the people who could get in the way of said destiny. Somehow, that line of thought kept coming back to General Iroh.

If Iroh truly was the unambitious, tea-loving fool the old man had become after giving up his military career six years ago, he posed no threat to Zhao's plans. If.

Zhao got up from his chair. "I've heard enough. Leave."

The sailor standing in front of Zhao had been in the middle of telling a long and boring story he had heard from his great grandfather. The man looked a bit insulted, but also had the good sense immediately bow down and make a quiet exit.

The sailor left the cabin, leaving Zhao alone with a few of his most trusted lieutenants.

"There are more people waiting in the hallway", one of said lieutenants pointed out. "Would you like me to go get the next one?"

Zhao had wanted to hear every informer _individually,_ so that they would not change their stories based on what others in the room had just said. That way the crew members also had the opportunity to rat out their comrades, if need be.

"Send everybody back to their ships. I have heard enough for one night", Zhao said, and dismissed the soldiers around him with a wave of a hand.

As soon as Zhao was alone, he began pacing around the room. Usually, Zhao preferred to think out loud; he liked to explain his train of thought to whoever was close enough to hear. This time, however, the Admiral decided to exhibit more caution. He had a feeling there was a traitor among his men, and most importantly, Zhao did not want anyone to overhear what he himself had done to Prince Zuko.

Zhao had presumed that the black dragon belonged to the Avatar. The timing coincided well enough, and it conveniently explained how another long-extinct creature had come back from the dead.

However, where was the dragon on all of his first encounters with the Air Nomad? The dragon had only appeared at the Pohuai Stronghold, and the Avatar had not been the only old enemy in the vicinity at the time.

Although Zhao could not prove it, he was fairly sure that the Blue Spirit was actually Prince Zuko in disguise. It did not take a mastermind to put two and two together. First, both were sighted in or near the Pohuai Stronghold, and then the same thing at the Fire Nation Colony. Wherever one of them showed up, the other tended to follow.

However, Prince Zuko was not clever or competent enough to tame a dragon and keep it a secret. Also, the Prince was now dead, but the dragon was still taking orders from someone...

Zhao slammed his fist on the desk. _That's it! The dragon belongs to General Iroh! _

Zuko's treason had made sense: desperate people did desperate things. However, at the time of Zuko's unfortunate "accident", Zhao had thought Iroh was too lazy to betray his country. The Admiral had assumed that Zuko's uncle had been oblivious to his nephew's illegal activities.

However, perhaps Iroh was more than just an unwitting accomplice to his nephew's treason. Perhaps, the old General was the real mastermind behind everything.

My my. It looks like Iroh is not as given up on the Dragon Throne as he has for years now lead people to believe.

All the pieces were clicking in place. Zhao had never understood why Iroh had given up the comforts of the Fire Palace only to go into exile with his nephew. However, by leaving the Fire Nation, Iroh had effectively distanced himself from the Fire Lord and all other suspicious eyes, and gotten more leeway to act out his own betrayal.

Teaching Prince Zuko illegal mindreading powers was only the tip of the iceberg. The real crown jewel of Iroh's plan was a dragon.

_I killed the last of the dragons' my ass! More like found one last egg, and an idea struck. _

Granted, if that hypothetical incident ever took place, it would have been over forty years ago. At the time, Iroh would have been the heir to the throne _anyway. _Still, it was plausible that Iroh had always been suspicious of his younger brother, and had been playing the long

game from the very start.

_Iroh's father hated dragons, so Iroh had to wait until Fire Lord Azulon died before he let anyone know about his little pet. When the old man finally passed away, it was Ozai who got the throne, and Iroh's plans changed. The old General must have been planning to overthrow his brother ever since. _

Now, the real mystery is: why is Iroh helping the Avatar?

Perhaps, Iroh hoped to use the Avatar to undermine the Admiral and the Fire Lord, or perhaps he even expected the Avatar to kill them both. Then Iroh would kill the unsuspecting Air Nomad himself, and rise to the throne as the savior of Fire Nation.

Zhao smiled. In a way, the Admiral was happy to hear that the Dragon of the West was still an opponent worthy of his attention.

Clever, Iroh. Very clever. Just not as clever as I am.

36. The Fall of General Iroh

36. The Fall of General Iroh

Lieutenant Jee was standing in a line. Having worked most of his adult life in the Navy, he was well used to waiting in line. There were about ten soldiers standing before him, and about a dozen behind him, all waiting to tell the Admiral what they knew about dragons.

It was very likely that Lieutenant Jee knew more about dragons than the rest of the line put together. That said Jee was in no hurry to see Zhao; he had not come all this way to meet the Admiral, nor did he have any intentions of sharing information with the man. It was General Iroh Jee had come to see.

When the word had spread that Zhao was inviting people with knowledge about dragons to come to the flagship, Lieutenant Jee had seized the opportunity to get onboard, and to hopefully have a chance to exchange a few words with General Iroh. Any member of the Prince's old crew could have come along, but had they come in great numbers that might have raised suspicions, and so Jee had convinced the others it was better he went alone.

Something strange was going on and Jee and the rest of the crew wanted to know what.

Jee was of course very happy to find out that Prince Zuko was alive, but at the same time, it was no coincidence that both Iroh and Zuko were at the North Pole and both under false pretense. They were after something, and if it was just the Avatar, why go through such theatrics?

No, there was a hidden threat out there, all right, but it was something bigger and more sinister than the Air Nomad. And come to think of it, Jee's hunch told him that this trouble was inside the ranks of the Fire Navy rather than somewhere outside it. That was why Jee needed to talk to General Iroh: he needed to tell the old General that Zuko's crew was still loyal to Iroh and the Prince. They could

be counted on, come what may.

An officer stepped out of Zhao's cabin, and stated: "The Admiral will receive no more visitors tonight. You are ordered to return to your ships."

The news caused some disappointed and even jealous murmurs, but no one protested loudly. The sailors started to make their way back towards the rear of the flagship, where rowing boats could be lifted onboard or off the ship. Usually, people walked from one fireship to another via ramps, but since the fleet was vast and potential informants scattered all around, they had been told to row there in lifeboats.

The door to Zhao's cabin opened again, and high-ranking military officials and Zhao's trusted men streamed out. Jee walked very slowly, waiting to see if General Iroh would emerge as well, but he did not. After a while of stalling, Jee decided to risk it. He turned to one of the officers, saluted him respectfully, and asked: "Is General Iroh still with the Admiral, sir?"

Jee was a little worried that he would get into trouble for this, but luckily the higher ranking officer looked tired and mildly surprised, but not suspicious or hostile. "No. General Iroh is resting in his own cabin."

Jee nodded briefly. The officer walked passed him, but on the last minute, he turned around and asked the inevitable question: "Why did you want to know?"

Jee smiled uncomfortably, and answered: "I served under the General for years, and to my shame I owe him a considerable sum of money from Pai Sho tournaments held on the ship. The General never pressured me about it, but the unsettled debt weighs heavy on my conscience, and I would rather pay it in this life than the next."

Jee felt like the other man could see right through his pitiful excuse, but since he had already come this far, there was little harm in pushing his luck a bit further. _In for an inch, in for a mile.

—

"You see, I had thought that I would meet the General here, since he is the Admiral's foremost expert on dragons. That is why I brought a considerable sum of money with me, and now I would hate to return to my ship before I've settled the debt. Is there any way I could visit General Iroh's quarters on my way off this ship?"

Now the higher-ranking man looked annoyed. He turned to look at the other sailors who were heading back to the lifeboats. Perhaps the officer did the math and realized that disembarking that many tiny rowing boats would take a lot of time, for he sighed, and stated: "All right, you may go. But remember: if you run into anyone on your way there and they ask you what the hell you are doing, don't tell them I gave you permission. Because I didn't. Because that would be a breach of protocol."

The other man turned around, walked away quickly, and jibed: "Fifth floor, corridor on the starboard side, the room at the very end."

The kindness of his fellow soldiers and countrymen never seized to amaze Lieutenant Jee. He had been a little afraid that the other man would ask to see the money he had mentioned as proof of his story, or perhaps even ask for his share of the loot, but luckily the officer had been honorable and trusting. Jee felt a bit bad for taking advantage of his trust, but it had to be done.

Still, although the Fire Nation and her soldiers had a bad reputation among the other nations, in Jee's opinion it was completely unfounded. A few rotten apples had given them all a bad name, or perhaps the other nations spoke ill of them because they were jealous of the Fire Nation; of her superior education system, and better social services in general.

Either way, Jee did not wait around to be told twice, but walked swiftly and purposefully in the direction he had been pointed at.

Now that he really thought about it, there was something very wrong with this picture. Why, indeed, was Iroh not present at Zhao's midnight meeting? Where was Zhao's foremost dragon expert now?

ooo

It was a few hours before sunrise, and although it was clear that the human did not think Nakki was ready, they couldn't afford to linger a moment longer. Therefore the two conspirators were finally on their way to Zhao.

"The most important thing to remember about Zhao is that he never..." Iroh began, but Nakki raised his hand and waved for him to stop speaking.

Iroh looked around them. Nakki laughed a bit, and said quietly: "There is no one here to hear us, in case you were wondering. I only stopped you because I do not think I can listen to even one more of your wisdoms, my friend. I am not sure if you have noticed this, but you have started every other sentence of this conversation with those exact words. Literally."

Nakki shrugged. "If I am found out, then that's that, but I doubt last minute tips will make much of a difference. The problem we really ought to concern ourselves with is how to get Zhao alone."

The old General smiled, and stated nonchalantly: "Leave that part to me. All you need to do is stay close to my side. When the time is right, I will initiate a conversation with Zhao about the 'secret details' of how I killed a dragon. I am certain that Zhao wants the honor of slaying the black dragon to himself, and therefore he is likely to dismiss everyone else in the room."

Nakki nodded, but wasn't entirely convinced. "Trueâ€¦ but what if he doesn't realize to excuse them?"

"Then we wait a little while longer, but trust me when I say: it is only a matter of time that Zhao starts one of his man-to-man, private rants about glory, greatness and being remembered by future generations," Iroh said, and actually rolled his eyes. "I pray to

Agni I did not sound like him when I was the leading General of the Fire Army."

Nakki couldn't help a genuine smile forming on his face, not that anyone could see it under the Fire Navy skull mask. He was quickly growing quite fond of the old General.

Nakki could hear footsteps ahead of them on the corridor, but he and the old human kept walking. After a moment, a group of dozen firebenders rounded the corner, lead by none other than Admiral Zhao himself.

Zhao saw the General, and came to a dramatic halt. Nakki and Iroh stopped as well.

"Well, well, well," Zhao drawled out, clearly enjoying the situation. "Who do we have here? But isn't it General Iroh. Just the man I wanted to see."

Busted, Nakki thought.

The spirit was a sour loser, and on those few occasions when the game truly mattered to him, he did not take setbacks with grace. It was undoubtedly for the best that his face was covered with a mask, for no matter how hard he tried to keep his composure, some of the disappointment must have seeped through.

"Admiral Zhao, was there something urgent you wanted to tell me?" Iroh said in his most innocent and polite tone. Nakki glanced at the man, a bit surprised that he was still trying to talk his way out of this. Couldn't the human tell that Zhao was on to them?

"Oh yes," Zhao replied with a venomous smile. "General Iroh, you are under arrest for plotting treason against the Fire Nation, the Navy, your commanding officer and the Fire Lord. Men, arrest him."

General Iroh frowned: "I don't understand."

"You can cut the harmless old man act, because I know the truth," Zhao stated.

Mimicking Zhao's movements, as he often did around humans, Nakki subconsciously nodded. As much was evident.

The Admiral seemed compelled to elaborate, though: "I know you didn't kill the last of the dragons; after you had killed its mother, you adopted the black dragon, and have been using it to stir chaos in the Fire Nation and to undermine your brother, the Fire Lord."

Nakki nearly twisted his neck; that was how fast his head snapped towards Zhao. The man had to be joking, but Nakki could not easily identify deception in the Admiral's eyes.

_Oh. So Zhao _doesn't_ know what's going on. Huh. _

Nakki might have laughed if the situation hadn't been so perilous. Instead he did what any reasonable water spirit would have done under the circumstances.

Nakki stepped in front of Iroh, and shouted at the top of his

lounge: "YOU'RE A TRAITOR?! HOW COULD YOU?! WHEN I WAS A BOY, YOU WERE MY _IDOL_"

Too much? Nakki wondered.

There was a shocked silence all around him. _Yeah, a bit too much_, Nakki decided, but went on anyway.

Nakki lounged towards the General, and waved his arms in a gesture that hopefully looked like a firebending kata.

Luckily, Nakki wasn't the only one thinking quickly, and also quick on his feet: the General grabbed Nakki's outstretched hand, and in one decisive movement pushed him backwards. The spirit managed to stumble back in a way that took down four other men, and their collective heap effectively blocked the entire corridor.

By the time Nakki was on his feet again, Iroh had disappeared around the corner in a literal puff of smoke.

"Find him! No one will rest before this traitor is brought before justice!" Zhao yelled, combed his hair back with his hand, and added more calmly: "We're onboard a _ship_. There is nowhere for him to hide."

_Dang it. Neither Zhao nor his bodyguards will rest before the Dragon of the West is neutralized. _Nakki frowned to himself, but then shook his head, and smiled. _Well, so it shall be then._

ooo

Three marines rounded the corner and ran towards Lieutenant Jee. Before he had time to ask what was going on, the men went right past him and tried to open the door to Iroh's rooms.

"The General is not..." Jee began to say, but let the rest of the sentence go unsaid in favor of staring in dumbfounded silence at the men who, without a moment of hesitation, kicked in the metal door. There was a loud screeching sound as the lock gave in under the bending-enhanced kick.

The marines entered the room, and soon after one of them shouted: "Clear!"

Jee considered simply walking away, but in the end could not resist following the marines into General Iroh's rooms.

First, Jee thought he must have gotten turned around at some point and arrived at the wrong place, because this could not be _Iroh's room_. The room was bare, practical and standardized; nothing like Iroh's personal, clutter-filled quarters onboard Zuko's ship were.

Had been. Jee had to remind himself that Iroh must have lost most of his collections when their old ship had gone up in smoke, and although Jee had personally never been one to cling to belongings, the thought of Iroh's loss made him oddly melancholic.

"What's going on?" Jee demanded to know in a tone that sounded hostile even to his ears. Whether the room looked like its owner or

not, this was still _General Iroh's room_, and the marines had no right to trash it.

"Haven't you heard?" one of the skull-masked men asked, incredulous. "Iroh's a traitor. He's been working with the Avatar all along."

In retrospect, it probably worked to Jee's advantage that the shock on his face was genuine. "...What? You can't be serious?"

"I thought everyone had heard," another marine said while rummaging through Iroh's desk, apparently looking for signs of secret correspondence.

"Who are you, anyway? What business have you here?" the leader of the marines asked while taking stock of the room, and then of Jee.

The Lieutenant stood up straighter and answered in an official, if mildly insulted tone: "I am Lieutenant Jee of the Provisions Ship 27, third wave. I'm here to clear a gambling debt with the General." He might as well stick to his original lie.

The marine eyed Jee a moment longer, but then dismissed him: "Report to the main deck. No boats coming in or going out of the ship, is that clear, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir." Jee clicked his heels together, fisted his other hand and bowed, and left the room as fast as he could without running.

Jee wasn't sure where this misunderstanding about General Iroh being a traitor was coming from, but what he did know was that his commanding officer needed help right now.

ooo

The first rays of sunshine illuminated the bay. Suddenly a voice called out: "Look, there he is! There's General Iroh! On the second deck, on the starboard side, heading west. Catch him!"

True enough; General Iroh was sprinting, surprisingly spritely for his old age, on the second deck, tossing left and right firebenders that tried to block his way.

Lieutenant Jee watched, frozen in place, how the man he considered the finest officer in all of Fire Navy battled to make his way towards the flagship's docking area. He was a considerable fighter, a force to be reckoned with, but it was clear this was one man's desperate struggle against insurmountable odds.

The Dragon of the West took a moment to catch his breath, and in a matter of seconds no less than seven soldiers surrounded him. In a unified kata, the marines created a massive firefist and hurled it at the old man.

After that it was like everything happened in slow motion. One moment the General was leaning against the ship's railing, the next the power of the attack pushed him straight over it and into the cold sea below. A horrible slamming splash, followed by nothing but the sounds of footsteps on the metal deck as everyone raced to see what had happened, and the sound of waves crashing against the ship's hull. Dozens of men stared into the relentless abyss, waiting for the old

man to emerge, but seconds turned to minutes, and still there was no sign of General Iroh.

No man, not even a master firebender, could hold his breath this long. Iroh must have injured himself on the broken sheets of ice floating all around the fleet, or his full armor and the strong currents must have pulled him under.

Either way, General Iroh was not getting back up.

Jee rubbed his eyes. And then he did so again, as if his inability to see properly was a key to understanding what he had just witnessed.

"No. It can't be!" Jee mumbled under his breath, when Admiral Zhao's order boomed: "Don't just stand there! Go find him!"

Hastily, the crowds of men started moving towards the back of the ship, but try as he might, Jee could not bring himself to move. Instead he stayed a moment longer and stared at the sea, hoping against hope to see Iroh get up. He was willing it to happen rather than believing that it might, but after another long while had passed, he could bare it no more.

A battle-hardened lieutenant, Jee was no stranger to losing men. Still, the loss of Iroh, accompanied with his own inability to do anything to help, was weighing heavy on him.

Jee took several steps backwards until his back was against a wall. There, he sat down on the cold metal floor.

Despite not being a religious man, Jee sent a prayer to Agni, and to all the Great Spirits to have pity on Iroh's soul.

That was a terrible way to die. For a son of fire, there was no death more desolate than in the cold depths of the ocean, alone and far from home.

Iroh deserved so much better.

ooo

"Katara? Katara! Are you okay?" Someone was jerking her by the shoulders and calling out her name.

"I'm awake, I'm awake!" Katara assured, although still half-asleep; she just wanted the person bothering her to leave her be.

But the voice was adamant, and as Katara began to awaken, she felt a throbbing pain in her temple, alongside a vague sense of stinging in her elbows and leg. Her foggy mind struggled to make sense of it all.

Then Katara remembered and was suddenly wide-awake.

"Aang," she gasped.

"No, just me." Sokka was hovering over her. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Katara got up to a sitting position and looked around herself. Sokka was there, and Princess Yue, but there was no sign of Zuko, or Aang.

She cursed under her breath.

I just never learn, do I? _So you hear a sad story about Zuko's past, and then you just have to try and see if there is something decent in the boy after all. Look how well _that_ turned out._

Let this be the last time her soft-heartedness put the people she cared about in danger. Let her never trust _a firebender_ again.

Sokka was still bombarding her with questions, but Katara wasn't really listening.

"Zuko. He has Aang. We have to find him at once." She got up swiftly, and the oasis around her swayed ever so slightly.

Sokka tried to support Katara, but she shrugged her brother off. "Did you not hear me? Zuko â€" has â€" Aang. There's no time to loose!"

Sokka raised his eyebrows. "Likeâ€| Zuko Zuko? Our Zuko? Angry, jerkish, prince of the Fire Nation Zuko?"

Katara glared, and deadpanned: "How many Zukos out to get Aang are there?"

She did not have time for stupid questions. And the headache did not help. Nor the pain in her leg; Katara looked down and saw that someone, probably Sokka, had already bandaged her bleeding leg. Well, at least his brother hadn't been _just_ wasting time.

Katara took a calming breath. She was angry, but not at Sokka, and it wasn't fair of her to take it all out on him.

"Look, I messed up, alright?" Katara admitted. "I let Zuko get into my head, and I failed to keep Aang safe. And now, thanks to me, Aang is in spirits only know what trouble and we _have to_ find him."

"Theâ€| the Prince of the Fire Nation is here? Here in our city?" Yue asked, looking perplexed.

Sokka turned to her to explain something about the Prince having caused Aang and them trouble on their way to the North Pole, but Katara cut him off: "Did you see any sign of him when you came here?"

Katara took a closer look at her surroundings. She couldn't immediately detect footprints or other signs of the Fire Prince. To her mild horror, it was clear by the gap in the ice ceiling of the oasis that it was already getting light outside. Zuko must have already gotten a head start on them.

"Katara," Sokka was suddenly right next to her. He put his hands on her elbows and looked his sister in the eye, "It's _okay_. We will find Aang and rescue him. We _always do_. And Zuko can't possible get

far, not in a hostile city under siege, not in this weather. We are going to find them."

Slowly, Katara nodded. Sokka was right. Of course they would save Aang, or he, a master airbender and an adept waterbender, would save himself. It was justâ€¦

"Iâ€¦ I promised to keep him safe." It was simple enough a task, and one she had utterly failed at.

"You know what we are going to do?" Sokka looked confident and reassuring. "We are going to get Appa, or Kulo, or both, and we are going to search the city and the surrounding areas from the sky. We will find them.

"Speaking of which, though: Kulo didn't happen to drop by here before Zuko did? Because he was definitely on his way here."

"Kulo?" Katara wrinkled her face.

Fire was destruction, and Katara didn't really trust any creature born out of the element. Now a sense of foreboding was creeping up her spine. The dragon had showed up here, and then all of a sudden Zuko caught up with them, too. Coincidence?

On the other hand, according to Aang, the dragon had rescued him _from the Fire Nation_â€¦ Perhaps Katara was jumping to conclusions prematurely.

"Haven't seen him," Katara answered, and reminded: "You were supposed to keep an eye on him."

"I know," Sokka stated uncharacteristically seriously. Her brother wasn't taking his duties to the Northern Tribe lightly. "I guess we'll just go get Appa, then. You don't happen to have the bison whistle on you?"

Katara reached for her pocket, and thanked the spirits she had had the insight to keep the small wooden instrument on her.

Katara blew on the whistle, but before the air bison had time to respond to the ultrasonic sound, echoes of battle horns filled the air.

The battle was about to continue. Katara frowned at the sky, which was rapidly gathering stormy clouds.

"Um, and when you say 'I let Zuko get into my head', do you mean, you knowâ€¦?" Sokka suddenly pondered.

"No, I don't," Katara quickly clarified. Silver lining in every cloud, she supposed. "Zuko was powerless."

"Powerless against your resistance orâ€¦?"

"Powerless as in could not bend."

"Okay, okayâ€¦" Sokka's thoughts were racing. "That's weird, but good to know."

Air whizzed past them as Appa arrived, accompanied by Momo, who flew over to sit on Katara's shoulder.

"Appa!" Katara greeted. "It's so good to see you. Now, we have to find Aang."

Although Katara had never been quite as convinced as Aang that the bison understood speech, on that moment, she could have sworn the animal caught on right away.

ooo

"Hey, what are you doing there?" came an angry question.

Jee looked up. An officer was marching at him.

Jee wasn't sure how long he had been sitting on the flagship's lower deck. Long enough to feel chilled to the bone despite his winter attire.

Stifly, Jee got up. At this point, he didn't really have the energy to lie. "Iâ€¦ I'm Lieutenant Jee from Provisions ship 27. I was supposed to return to my ship when, wellâ€¦" Jee gestured around himself helplessly "there was all the commotion, and then General Iroh died."

It was perhaps wrong of him to mourn a traitor, but Jee couldn't help it.

The other officer's expression softened just a bit. "Well, yes, it has been quite a morning, hasn't it. You should make your way to your ship though. This siege won't last much longer, and all should return to their stations for the final battle."

As ordered, Jee began to make his way to the rear of the ship. Dozens of rowing boats had been launched from the ship to search the surrounding waters, but Jee knew that if Iroh had been this long in the water, there was no hope of finding him alive.

Before the Lieutenant had reached the rowing boats loading area, he was stopped again. This time a stranger standing next to Jee suddenly pulled at his sleeve. Jee turned to face the hooded man to seeâ€¦ General Iroh!

"Whatâ€¦?! Howâ€¦?" was Jee's unintelligible first response. His sanity had to be failing him, or maybe the ghost of the General had risen from his watery grave to haunt him.

Jee stumbled several steps backwards. Unable to find the words, he wailed his arms to the general direction of the sea where he had just seen Iroh disappear.

"I will explain everything later," Iroh whispered in his ever calm and up-spirited way, while at the same time pulling somewhere from his sleeve a mercenary's mask and helmet, and trying it on his head.

"Butâ€¦ I just saw _you_ fall downâ€¦"

"_Later_," the General stressed. "Now, if you don't mind, we must

make our way to a search boat."

Jee forced himself to snap out of it. Iroh was right. Although Jee had no idea what he had just witnessed, he could recognize General Iroh regardless of what the man wore, and this was he. If Jee wanted to prevent the tragedy he had seen from becoming reality, now wasn't the time for questions but for action.

As a trained soldier, Jee could always get into a state of mind where nothing mattered but the mission at hand.

The General had a grey extra winter coat hiding a high-ranking uniform, and with a metallic helmet, and a hood on top of it all, he was nearly unrecognizable. Unless someone stopped to take a closer look, that was.

The two officers swiftly crossed a corridor and arrived at the search boats. The Lieutenant ordered a group of seamen to lower him and the 'specialist' down in the rowing boat he had originally arrived in, demanding that it was "Admiral's orders!" that the search grid was widened while they still had sunlight.

Thank Agni the seamen were too ready to obey to truly observe. Had they paused to take a look, they must have seen just how nervous and sweaty Jee was. He could face danger without batting an eye, but the art of deception was something he had very little experience in.

The boat was lowered down, and when the first waves beat its sides, Jee at once began rowing around the the flagship's hull. Iroh looked around him as if peering into the dark waters in search of a lost man. Jee quickly steered the boat behind a close-by ship, and then another. In the chaos, no one seemed to notice one boat taking a detour from the immediate search area.

Soon, they could already see Provisions Ship 27, and Jee could breathe just a bit easier.

"Sir," Jee began, "If you don't mind my asking, what the hell is going on in here?"

Iroh lifted his hand to silence Jee, but did not lift his gaze from the sea. Following the General's gaze, Jee could have sworn he saw in the distance something dark sink into the water.

A cold sweat dripped down his forehead, but before the Lieutenant could be sure of what he saw, the figure was gone.

"I am terrible sorry for having mixed you up in all this." Iroh stated calmly, still staring at the now clear spot in the distance. "But right now it is paramount that I am not discovered."

A lump in the Lieutenant's throat prevented speaking, so he just nodded. Although Jee had grown up surrounded by the sea, the freezing waters all around them had never felt less safe, and the younger officer rowed hastily on.

"You can trust myself and the crew, sir. Just name what you need us to do," Jee finally managed to recover his voice as they were closing in on Ship 27. "But there are also marines aboard the ship."

The General turned his friendly eyes to the Lieutenant. "That is most kind of you. Right now I need to lay low for a moment, and I also need a way to get on shore and into the Water Tribe Capital."

Jee nodded. For Iroh, the enemy capital was almost as unsafe as the flagship, but it wasn't Jee's place to question the General's orders. In Jee's experience, the Dragon of the West tended to know what he was doing.

ooo

Zuko tried actively not to fear for the worst. He really did.

Yet not knowing what had happened to his uncle was eating at him.

There has been a delay to the plan, he told himself. _The right moment just hasn't presented itself yet._

And yet his mind could not focus on these relatively harmless possibilities, but provided images of Iroh locked up in a dungeon, or betrayed by the spirit and fighting for his life, or— No, Zuko could not bare to think of alternatives worst than that.

Sticking to the plan be damned, the literally only thing keeping Zuko from going to go find his uncle right now was the fact that he still couldn't shift into his dragon form, and without wings, he wouldn't get near the flagship.

Zuko had, however, moved his location to one even closer to the main battle in the desperate hopes of overhearing what was going on with Zhao, the fleet, and his uncle. Mostly his uncle. Although the Fire Navy had advanced considerably during the day, they had not moved towards Zuko's location on the far left side of the city. He had had no luck in learning what was going on, and although all his urges told him to leave the Avatar behind and sneak even closer to the action, he had so far resisted.

Accompanied by worry over what he didn't know, pain over what he saw right before him, and a phlegmatic Avatar, this had to be the longest day of Zuko's life. Even the day of the faithful Agni Kai had been over with quickly, if nothing else. Waiting was worse.

And yet, even the longest of days had to come to an end. During the day a blizzard had washed over the city, but now the weather was clearing. The sun was almost set, and soon the full moon alone would light the sky. Still, the Fire Navy troops showed no signs of pulling back, and this, too, worried Zuko.

But that was all the time Zuko had to dwell on the matter as it was on that moment that a ghost light whirled past the Prince. It seemed the Avatar had deemed now an appropriate moment to rejoin the world of the living.

"Mmphh," the boy mumbled, reaching to wipe sleep dust from his eyes.

Zuko, already on his feet, spun around to face the Avatar. What he really wanted to do on that moment was to grip the kid by the shoulders and tell him to get his act together and stop going to the

spirits to ask for "massive spirit attacks". Zuko was busy and did not have time to babysit anyone right now; especially not the World Spirit from his own stupidity.

Yet Zuko knew, regardless of what had happened onboard the flagship, Uncle would not want him to misbehave and risk the safety of everyone.

Zuko forced himself to take a deep breath and reign in his temper, and when he opened his eyes, they met the Avatar's surprised gaze.

"Prince Zuko?" the question was more astonished than anything, as if the boy wasn't sure if he had actually woken up. Or maybe he just had a hard time recognizing the Prince with a new hairdo and white clothing.

Not the worst possible reaction, Zuko thought, mildly encouraged. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Yeah, it's me, but I am not here to capture you, or hurt you, or sabotage the Water Tribe, or anything like that."

Zuko could practically see the wheels turning in Aang's head as it only now occurred to the kid just how ominous it was that the Prince of the Fire Nation, the face of the enemy, was here, in the Water Tribe capitol.

Zuko quickly continued: "Look, Avatar. Aang. I know we've had our differences, but believe it or not, today we are fighting for the same cause. I want the Fire Navy to stop attacking and leave the Water Tribe in peace, just the same as you do. And I think that together, we might stand a chance of making that happen without anyone else getting hurt."

Okay, the last bit was stretching the truth â€" even in his wildest dreams, Zuko wasn't naïve enough to think that just simply 'working together' would solve all the problems â€" but Zuko really needed to make a case for himself; and do it better than what he had with Katara.

It was like his word held magic. Aang's face cleared up, and at the part where Zuko promised to end the conflict in a peaceful way, the young airbender actually smiled.

"Together?" The avatar asked. "Like, as in, you want to be my friend?"

Zuko had no idea what to say to that, so he just went with a "Um, yes?" that was closer to a question than an affirmative.

And yet it seemed to be all the convincing the good-hearted airbender required.

"Oh, well, that's great!" the Avatar beamed. "I don't want anyone getting hurt either."

Aang summoned a small gush of air to help him jump up and, and in the same fluid motion straightened his bright orange tunic, oblivious to how his bending made Zuko tense.

"But first, we need to save Tu and La!" the boy suddenly remembered.
"They are in danger!"

Zuko blinked.

The Avatar looked around himself. "Wow, I'm not at the oasis anymore. You haven't seen my staff have you?"

Zuko hadn't, and awkwardly half-shrugged his shoulders to indicate as much. He was out of intelligible things to say. Many a time he had played out in his head how a meeting where he tried to assure the Avatar to trust him might play out, but he had not seen this coming.

This cannot be this easy, Zuko had just time to think when a bison landed on the wide ice balcony next to them.

The Avatar bolted to embrace his pet, but neither the animal nor its passengers seemed as easy to ignore the firebender behind their friend. The Air bison literally growled. Zuko had always suspected the perceptive animal could see in him what evaded most humans; that there was a predator under the façade.

The Water Tribe siblings jumped down, and Zuko took a bending stance.

"No, wait," Aang turned to his friends. "It's okay. Zuko promised to help me put an end to this battle."

Sokka turned to look at Aang, incredulous. Katara didn't waste time with that, but proceeded to attack.

Before Zuko could jump out of the way, the ice under him shot up and threw him up and against one of the hard ice pillars.

Zuko tried to get up, but suddenly his feet were incased in ice, and his left hand, which he had used to get support from the pillar, was also stuck on the cold surface.

Instinct told Zuko to call for his firebending and free himself, but he thought better of it. Perhaps the others would stop to listen if they thought him incapacitated.

"No! Katara stop!" The Avatar shouted, and jumped in front of his friend, hands wailing in the air. "Zuko is a friend."

"No, he is not," came Katara's steady answer, which was colder than the icy world around them.

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to agree with Katara on this; you can't trust Zuko," Sokka put in, though in a less sure tone.

"No, Aang is right. I'm not here to hurt you."

"Not hurt!" Katara huffed, and indicated at her leg. "Then what do you call this?"

"Um, a miscommunication?" Zuko tried, but could see that his answer, although honest, only served to irritate Katara.

"Look, guys, we don't have time for this." Aang said. He was so suddenly so serious that everyone turned to look at him. "The great spirits are in danger, and I have to get back to the oasis right now."

Yue, still up on Appa's back, gasped. Katara pointed a finger at Zuko: "But you can't trust him. He is not a friend_."

"Yes, I am," Zuko was annoyed, perhaps more so than he was entitled to be. "I am not trying to capture Aang; I haven't been for a while. I am trying to do good things. And I have helped you more than once."

"Helped us?" Katara questioned, still ready to attack.

"Yes, helped you." For a moment, Zuko was about to reveal his identity as a Dragon Warrior, but instead opted for: "I am the Blue Spirit." Saying he was a dragon seemed a bit too farfetched, especially as he currently had no means of proving the claim.

To demonstrate, Zuko used his free hand to pull out another of his swords from his back, and in one fluent motion the Prince freed his hand and both his legs and jump up.

Now all the kids were outright gaping at him.

"No, it can't be!" Katara said, but did not sound sure at all.

"Oh, man, he's right!" Sokka slapped himself on the forehead.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"Well, it makes sense," Sokka defended. "I mean, I knew I had seen that fighting style before."

"It was you who helped me out of Pohuai?" The Avatar wondered. "But why?"

All eyes were back on Zuko. "I'm not a bad person. I'm just trying to serve my nation my own way."

Sokka asked "By turning traitor?" on the exact same moment Aang happily replied "By joining us!"

Zuko looked at both kids in turn. "No, I am not a traitor; I just strongly disagree with the current regime about what is in Fire Nation's best interest. And no, I don't plan to join you. I can't join anyone who seeks the destruction of citizens of Fire Nation. But: today I am on your side, and you will need my help putting an end to this invasion."

That shut everyone up for a moment, and Zuko made use of the pause and sheathed the Dao blade back on his back. "Look, I know this is all kind of hard to believe, but today my goal is the same as yours: to put an end to all this bloodshed. And I have a plan on how to do it."

Zuko's heart sank a little as he mentally corrected his verb to the past tense; currently, he doubted the plan was still a reality.

"We can't trust him," Katara repeated, her mind apparently made. Yet she directed her words at Aang, the group leader, seeking his approval.

The Avatar, too, had made up his mind. "I want to trust him. All nations should work together. If Zuko wants to help us, I say we let him."

To Zuko he added: "And I don't seek to destroy anyone! I just want this war to end."

Slowly, Zuko nodded. To his surprise, the Prince found he did not doubt the Avatar's intentions. Still, he needed to be sure that they were talking about the same thing: "You promise not to hurt people of fire unless forced to do so to save lives of others, and even then to try to avoid casualties?"

Despite the sounds of objections from his friends, the Avatar responded soberly "I promise." For a moment, he sounded much older than his 12 years.

"Now, we need to find Tu and La," Aang concluded.

"Didn't you just meet them in the Spirit World?" Sokka asked. He had kept unusually quiet, and still looked mostly puzzled.

"No. They are here, in this world, and they are in danger," Aang clarified to the surprise of all present.

Suddenly, everything went red.

While Zuko, Katara and the Avatar looked up at the sky, Sokka was at once back on Appa and by Yue's side. From the corner of his better eye, Zuko could tell that the Princess was holding her head. Yet he couldn't pull his attention from the eerily red full moon.

"Iâ€¦ I can't bend," Katara stammered, shocked.

"We need to move!" Aang airbending-jumped atop his bison.

Katara and Zuko exchanged a worried look. Katara moved to the bison, and Zuko followed, but Appa grumbled another low growl at the approaching Fire Prince.

"Wow, wow, easy. I'm not going to eat you," Zuko lifted his palms up in assurance.

"Appa, easy," the Avatar echoed and patted the animal's thick fur coat. "Zuko is a friend now."

Zuko locked eyes with the bison, willing it to calm down, and then climbed on top.

The next thing he knew, they were up in the air.

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Two hours earlier

Admiral Zhao looked at his victorious advancement to the frozen city. He also peered behind him at the setting sun.

He wished he had someone to share his thoughts with; someone who could truly appreciate the mastery of his plan. But it was of course for the best that the treacherous General had been dealt with. And even if the old man had somehow miraculously survived the fall and evaded capture, soon nothing, not even the spirits themselves and certainly not a mere mortal bending master, could stand in his way.

"This ends tonight," the Admiral commented to no one in particular. He turned to face the men around him. "Give the order to dock this ship, and gather up a small landing party."

"Yes sir," more than one soldier responded in unison, and they all bowed deeply.

"Prepare seven komodo-rhinos," he added. The beasts would get in the way at some point, but it wasn't a bad idea to start the way to the secret oasis by riding through the desolate docks.

An officer next to him bowed deeply, and moved to head where the mounts were kept. Almost as an afterthought, Zhao enquired: "You. What's your rank, seaman?"

"Sergeant, sir. Sergeant Liu."

"Well, Sergeant, today you will have the honor of witnessing the beginning of a new era."

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A/N

I am really sorry about the long radio silence. Please don't hate me...

End
file.